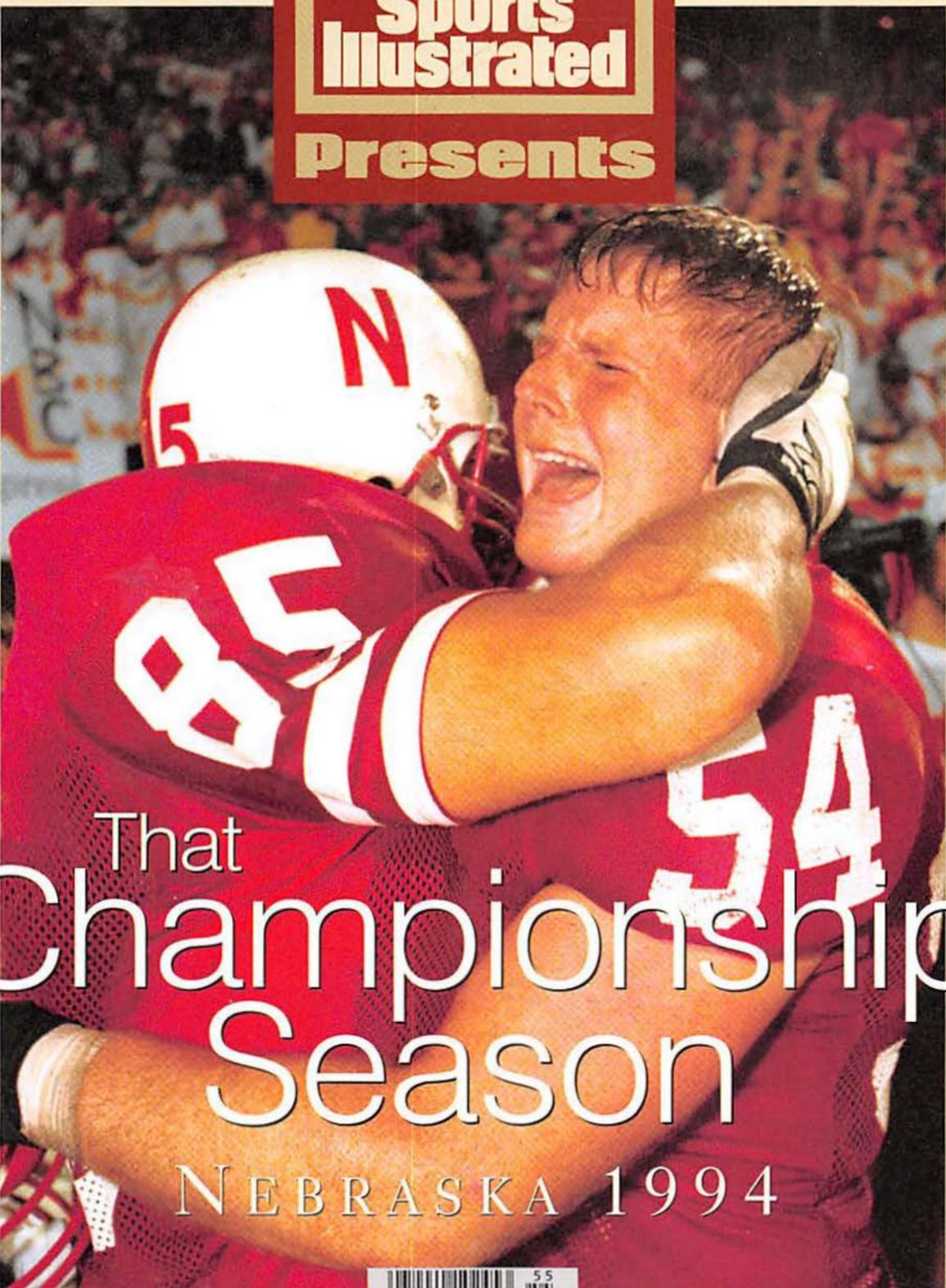


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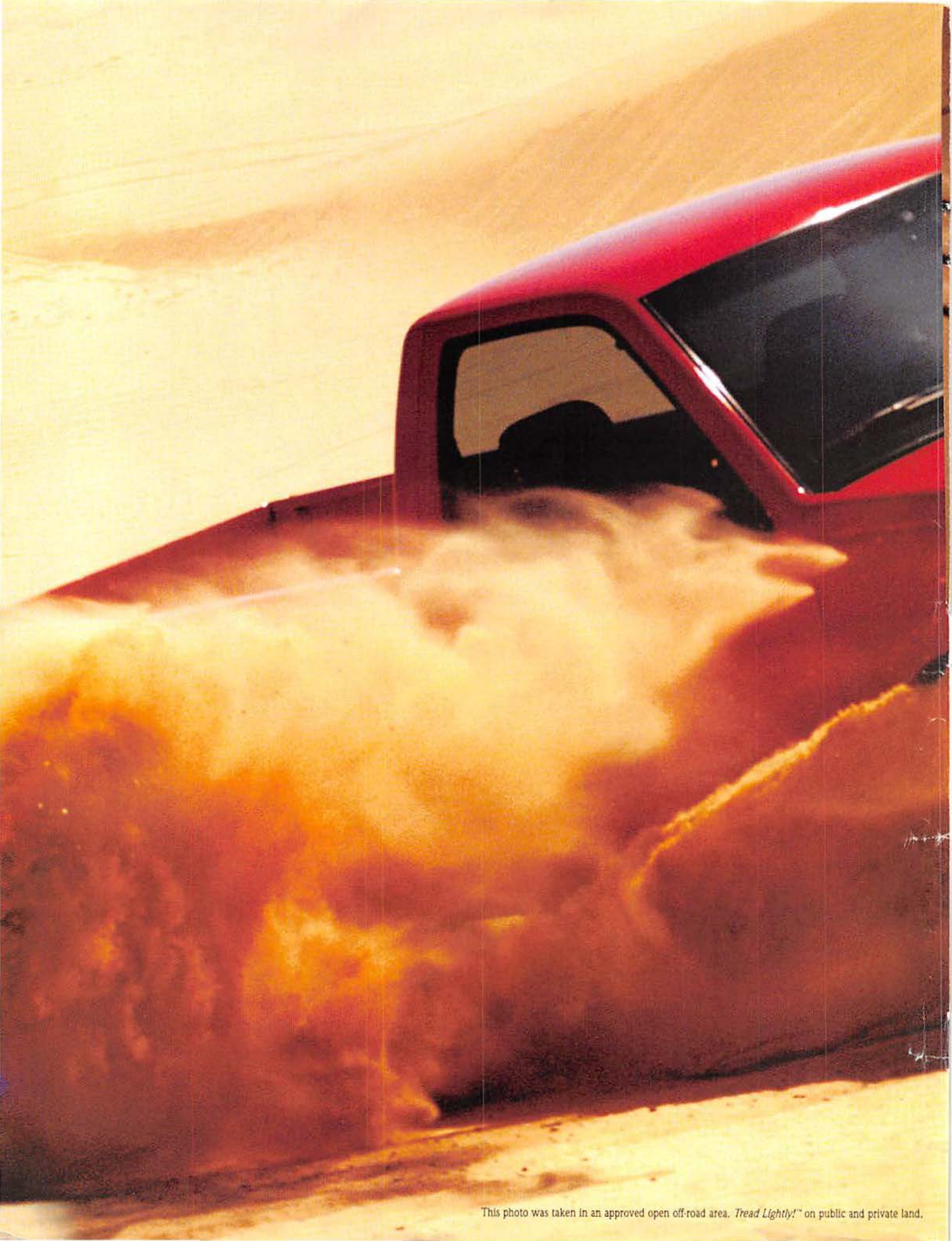
**Sports
Illustrated**
Presents



That
**Championship
Season**

NEBRASKA 1994





This photo was taken in an approved open off-road area. *Tread Lightly!*™ on public and private land.

LIKE A ROCK



Contents

4 Glory Days

Husker history really began with Bob Devaney in '62 • BY DOUGLAS S. LOONEY

10 As Good As It Gets

Nebraska beat Oklahoma in a legendary '71 showdown • BY DAN JENKINS

16 The '94 Season

The Cornhuskers overcame injury and adversity to finish unbeaten and No. 1

58 Nebraska People

Brook Berringer, Tommie Frazier, Ed Stewart and Lawrence Phillips

64 Prime Cuts

Nebraska's offensive linemen exuded a glamour all their own • BY S.L. PRICE

70 Sour Oranges

For past Husker teams, Miami meant misery • BY CHRISTIAN STONE

74 Miami or Bust

Big Red fans went to great lengths to reach the Orange Bowl • BY HANK HERSCH

78 Galloping Ghosts

Nebraska beat Miami to exorcise a decade of demons • BY S.L. PRICE

88 Tom's Title

Now you can call Tom Osborne a national champion • BY SALLY JENKINS

**Sports
Illustrated**
Presents

On the cover: Center Aaron Graham (54) celebrates with tight end Matt Shaw.
Cover photograph by **ROBERT ROGERS**

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Glory Days

It wasn't until '62 that Husker history really began—with the arrival of Bob Devaney

BY DOUGLAS S. LOONEY



Bob Devaney, Nebraska's former football coach and athletic director, is now AD emeritus. He is sitting in his memorabilia-strewn office on the Lincoln campus, amidst photographs of the great times. But if he could have only one picture on the walls, which one would it be?

"That one right there," says Devaney, head coach from 1962 through 1972. Without hesitation Devaney points to a faded black-and-white photo of the 1971 Orange Bowl queen and her attendants.

And Devaney laughs the laugh of success. Since the day back

Devaney's first QB, Dennis Claridge (left, in '62), led Nebraska to a perfect Big Eight autumn in '63.



HIGH CLARKSON (2)

in 1961 when he left his head coaching job at Wyoming to accept the challenge of resurrecting Nebraska football the next season, he has seldom had much to cry about.

Indeed, in so many ways, the history of Nebraska football can be reduced to two words: Bob Devaney.

Predictably, Devaney, 79, gives a horselaugh to such extravagant views of his place in Cornhusker history. "I just figure I've been luckier than hell," he says. And while it may be hyperbole to say that Devaney invented Nebraska football, it is certainly no exaggeration to say that, at the very least, Devaney reinvented Nebraska football.

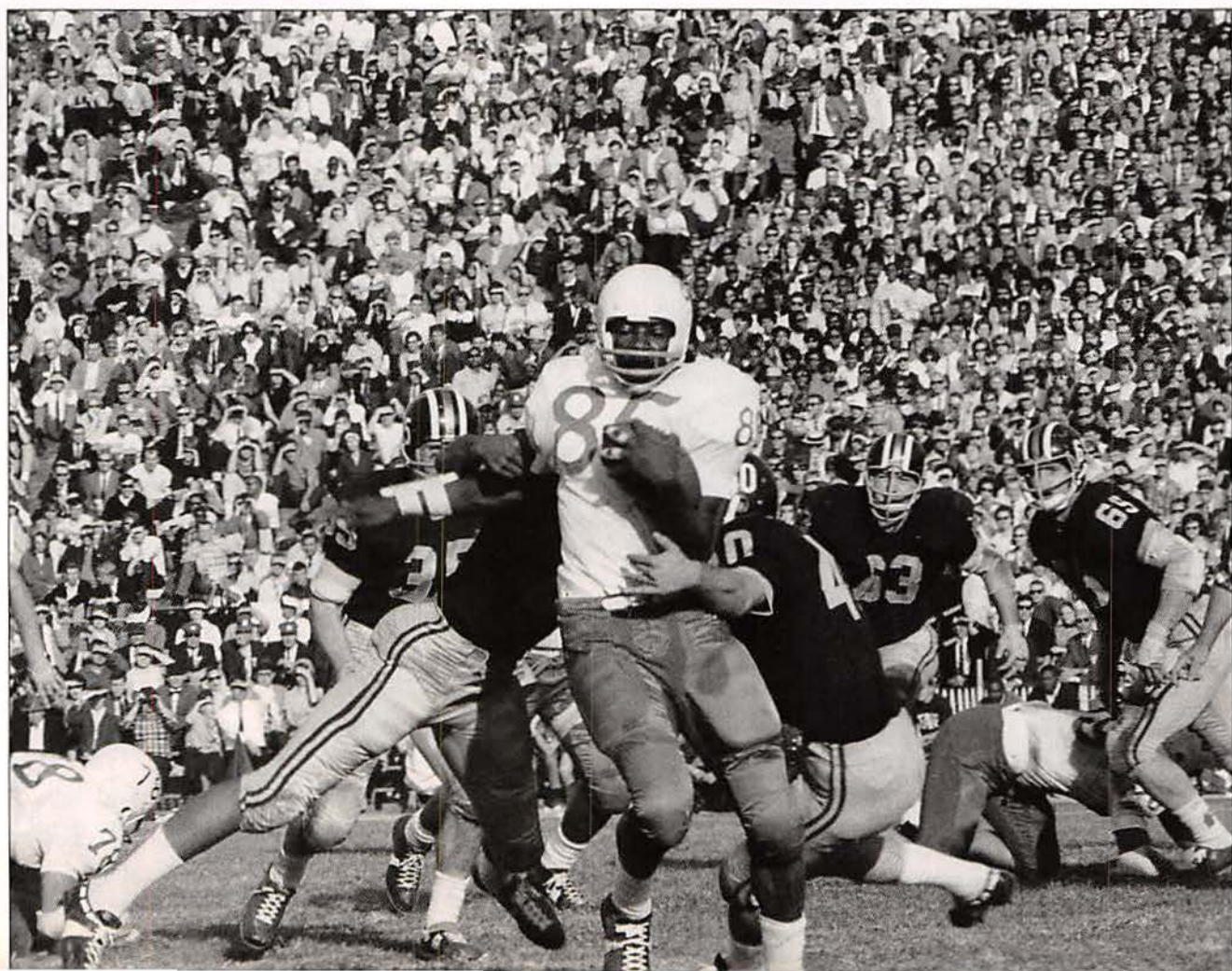
The university's gridiron history did get off to a successful start in 1890, when it thumped the Omaha YMCA 10-0 in its first game. Enthusiasm for football was instant. In the early days, the most pressing concern was to settle on a suitable nickname. The Nebraska squad was at various times dubbed the Antelopes, the Bugeaters and the Mankilling Mastodons. But

For split end Freeman White, 1965 was a very good year: All-America honors and a 10-1 season.

finally, in 1900, the team became known as the Cornhuskers. As charter members of the Big Eight (established in 1907 as the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association), the Huskers, as they were soon fondly called, won nine championships in the league's first 11 years. They even played in the Rose Bowl in 1941, losing to Stanford 21-13 but making a quantum leap in national renown.

With World War II, though, Nebraska "seemed to drop out of football for a while," according to Devaney. That's because the school, unlike many others, had no military training programs with which to attract young, able-bodied players. From 1941 through 1962, the Huskers finished in the Top 20 once; that was in 1950, when they were 17th. One coach during that era, Bill Jennings, became so depressed by all the losing that, in 1960, he said, "I've been watching things closely, and I don't think this state can ever be great in anything." Subsequently he grumbled, "We can't feed the ego of the state of Nebraska with the football team."

Enter Bob Devaney, then 46. He says now that achieving greatness was not his aim, not even close: "My goal was to





RICH CLARKSON

While Osborne (above left, in '63) learned from Devaney, Rodgers (20) was Osborne's pupil.

have a winning program so I wouldn't get fired. I wanted to win just enough games to please the alumni but not so many as to draw an NCAA investigation."

Devaney, a longtime Michigan high school football coach before building a 35-10-5 record in five seasons at Wyoming, instantly connected with Nebraskans. He saw no reason why the state's ego couldn't be fed by football. And he succeeded because his own ego never sidetracked him. In fact, Devaney gives full credit to an assistant coach named Tom Osborne for suggesting before the 1969 season that the Huskers change from the full-house backfield formation to an I formation, advice that was offered after the '68 team had struggled to a 6-4 mark and, over the course of the season, had been outscored by their opponents. The I provided the power thrust toward greatness—and never since have the Huskers scored fewer points in a year than their competitors. Says Devaney, "I'd like to say I turned it around, but it was Tom."

Devaney snorts at the suggestion that he was a football wizard, even though his record argues otherwise: He was undefeated in the Big Eight in his second year on the job, 47-8 in his first five years ('62-66) and 42-4-2 in his last four ('69-72); he won eight Big Eight titles, took nine of his 11 teams to bowls and won two national championships, in 1970 and 1971. "Hell, no, I'm no genius," he says. "We inherited some pretty good players, we didn't beat them up in practice, and we taught them fundamentals so they at least knew what to try to do."

Devaney built the ship, recruited the crew, designed the sails and set them; since taking over in 1973, Osborne has stayed the course. The Huskers hold 14 NCAA team records, including

JOHN D. HANLON



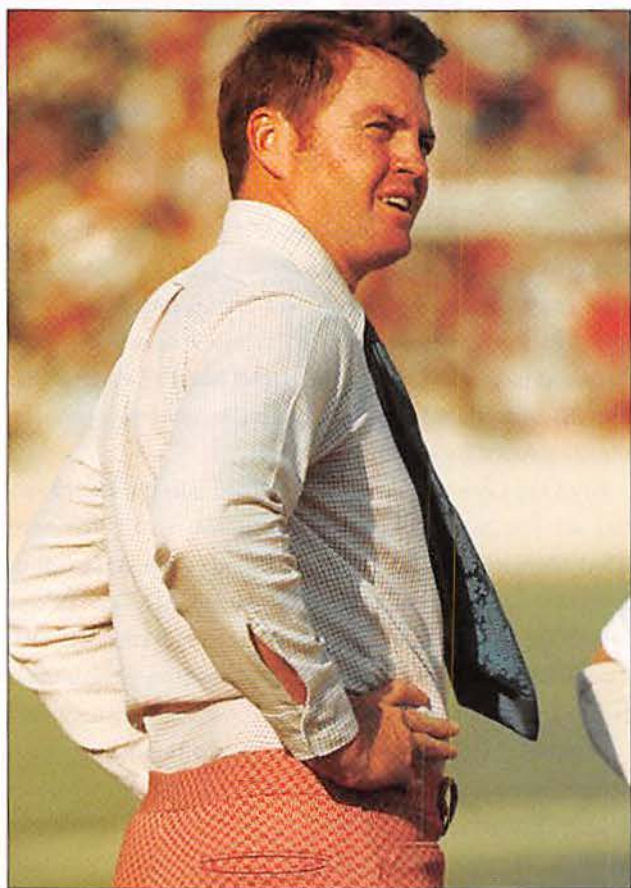
most consecutive winning seasons: 33. Eleven times they have led the nation in rushing, all since 1963. They have 40 conference championships to Oklahoma's 33. Six times since 1965 Nebraska has been undefeated in the regular season. Between 1970 and this season, the Huskers have had 18 finishes in the Top 10. And they have had 26 straight bowl appearances, breaking Alabama's record of 25.

Even the Cornhusker fans have gotten into the record-setting act: For 201 straight games, an NCAA record, they have filled Memorial Stadium with their bodies and their spirit. Longtime Devaney sidekick and associate AD Don Bryant says, "The fans support us economically and affectionately. They love to send their children to the University of Nebraska. It's what you do—go to Nebraska and love Nebraska football."

Another prevailing sentiment is love for the players. Fans can get downright teary when they reflect on Heisman winners Johnny Rodgers (1972: 143 career catches, 17.3 yards per catch, 26 TDs) and Mike Rozier (1983: 4,780 rushing yards, an NCAA-record average of 7.16 yards per attempt for his career). Seventy-one Nebraska players have been named All-Americans, 11 of them two times, and the roll call of Husker heroes is seemingly endless: Vic Halligan, Guy Chamberlin, Sam Francis, Tom Novak, Bob Brown, Jerry Murtaugh, Larry Jacobson, Jerry Tagge, Rich Glover, Dave Rimington, Dean Steinkuhler and Trev Alberts. That's only a start.

And yet over the past three decades Nebraska has been much more *team* than a collection of individual stars. Another of its big-time heroes, halfback Bob Reynolds, who played in the early '50s, reflected the Nebraska outlook when he said, "A touchdown is a chain of circumstances involving 22 players. Very often the fellow who carries the ball across the goal line is the least important link in the whole chain."

Nebraska insiders contend that while Devaney is the centerpiece of Nebraska football, two individuals who are far less well known join him as the most influential men in the school's history. The first is Ed Weir, an undersized athlete but probably the Huskers' best defensive player ever. In 1925 he became, as a tackle, the school's first two-time All-America; but more important, he established the image of the clean-cut Nebraska



RICH CLARKSON

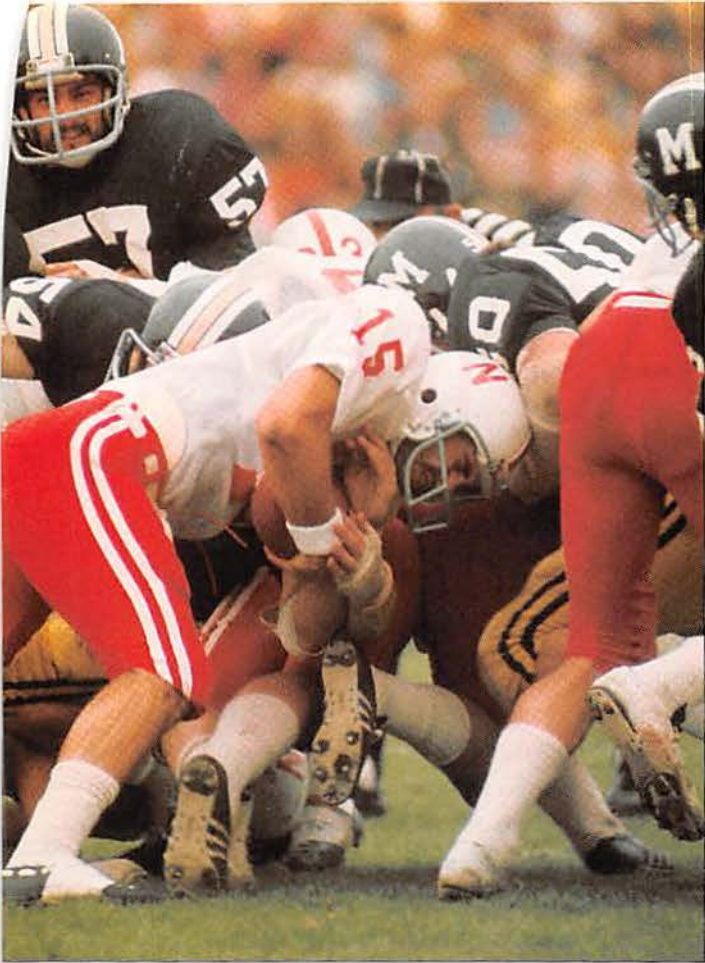
Osborne, who took over in '73 (above), has helped develop the talents of (clockwise from top) All-America QB Vince Ferragamo (15), I-back Roger Craig (21), All-America NG Rich Glover (79) and Outland Trophy winner Rimington.

college boy who studied hard and played football well. The other obscure but influential character was John K. Selleck, the school's athletic business manager from 1923 to '46. Bryant says it was Selleck who, in 1924, created the idea of the Knot-hole Gang, kids who sat in the end zone in seats made available to them for a dime. "That," says Bryant, "is how the base of support got built." The Boy Scout usher program, also created by Selleck, generated even more disciples. Bryant knows about all this: He sat with the Knothole Gang as a kid, he ushered as a



MANNY MILLAN





RICH CLAMSON



NEL LEIFER



HEINZ KLUETMEIER

Boy Scout, and he has attended about 600 Nebraska games.

Husker fans are a hardy lot; they even look back on low points with affection. Devaney feels responsible for the very lowest point: his team's 47-0 season-ending loss to Oklahoma on Nov. 23, 1968, a day that lives in infamy in his mind. But in a distinctly philosophical and thoroughly Nebraska way, Devaney said this after the loss: "If we have any kind of people coming back next year, this should make them quite determined not to let anything like this happen again." Two seasons later, the Huskers were national champs.

But there is at least one low point that remains a real sore point for the Cornhusker faithful: the 27-24 loss to Penn State on Sept. 25, 1982. Penn State tight end Mike McCloskey was clearly out of bounds when he caught a 15-yard pass at the two-yard line near the end of the game; the play was ruled a completed pass, and Penn State scored on the next play. Both teams finished the season with one loss and won their respective bowl games, but the national title went to the Nittany Lions.

The high points fill pages. It is almost unanimously held that the most glorious peak was Nebraska's storied 1971 win over Oklahoma, 35-31, in the "Game of the Century" (*following story*). But that afternoon does not stand alone. There were the Huskers' 1937 win, 14-9, over Minnesota at a time when the Golden Gophers were mighty, and the 1959 win over Oklahoma, which broke the Sooners' streak of 51 Big Eight victories, begun in 1952. On and on the highlights roll.

Asked how he likes being credited as creator and king of Nebraska football, Devaney tilts his chair back and says, "I enjoy it. I like listening to it. I don't believe it."

He gazes at the pictures, savoring the memories, then says, "But we did get it turned around, didn't we?" ■

As Good As It Gets

Nebraska beat Oklahoma in a '71 showdown that had all the stuff of legend | BY DAN JENKINS



In the land of the pickup truck and cream gravy for breakfast, down where the wind can blow through the walls of a diner and into the grieving lyrics of a country song on a jukebox—down there in dirt-kicking Big Eight territory—they played a football game on Thanksgiving Day that was mainly for the quarterbacks on the field and for self-styled gridiron intellectuals everywhere. The spectacle itself was for everybody, of course, for all of those who had been waiting weeks for Nebraska to meet Oklahoma, or for all the guys with their big stomachs and bigger Stetsons, and for all the luscious coeds who danced through the afternoons drinking daiquiris out of paper cups. But the game of chess that was played with bodies, that was strictly for the cerebral types who will keep playing it into the ages and wondering whether it was the greatest collegiate football battle ever. Under the agonizing conditions that existed, it well may have been.

Quality is what the game had more of than anything else.

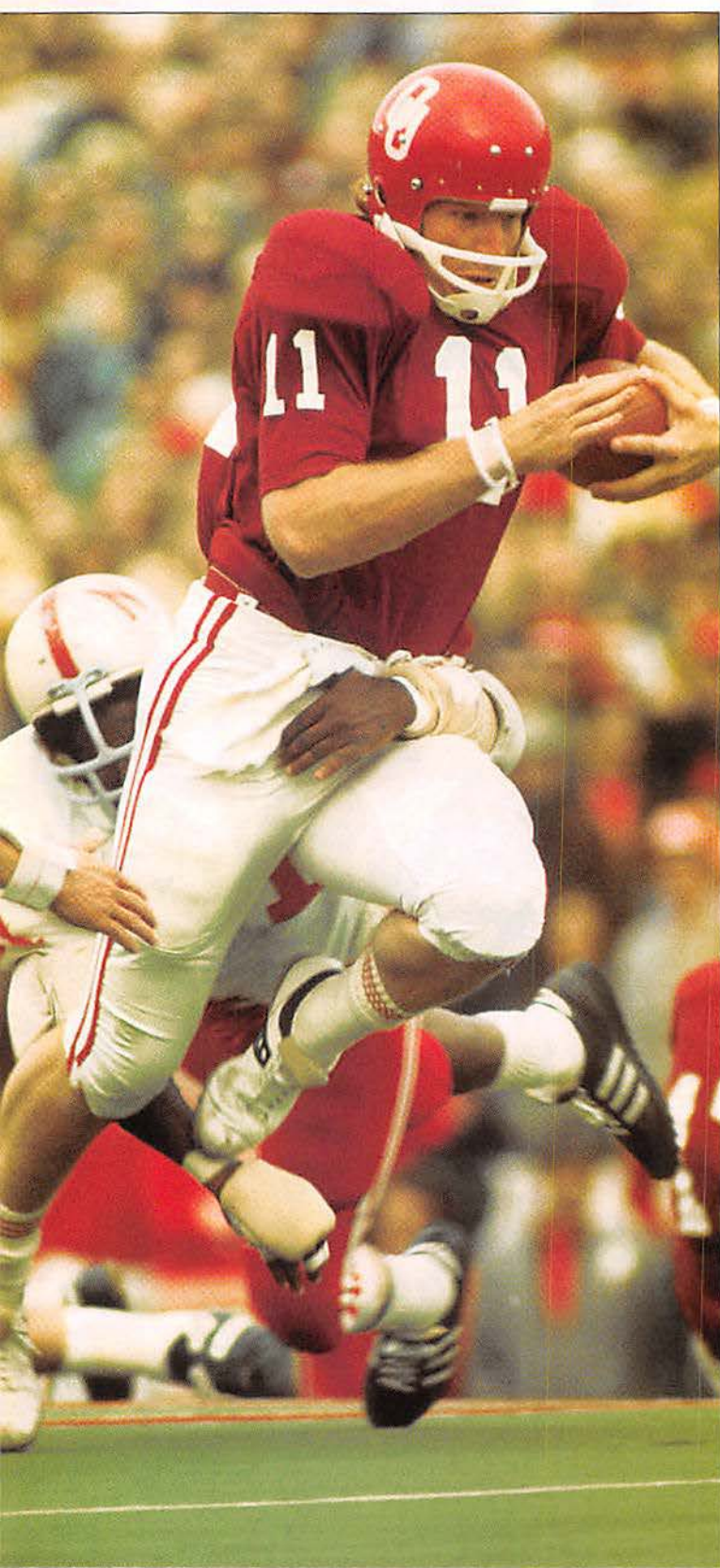
There had been scads of games in the past with equal pressure and buildup. Games of the Decade or Poll Bowls or whatever you want to call them. Something played in a brimming-over stadium for limb, life and a national championship. But it is impossible to stir the pages of history and find one in which *both* teams performed so reputably for so long throughout the day.

In essence, what won it for Nebraska was a pearl of a punt return in the game's first 3½ minutes. Everything else balances out, more or less, even the precious few mistakes—Oklahoma's three fumbles against Nebraska's one, plus a costly Nebraska offside, the only penalty in the game. There was an unending fury of offense from both teams that simply overwhelmed the defenses, maniacal though they were. But that is the way it is with modern college football. You can't take away every weapon. Both Nebraska and Oklahoma stopped the things they feared most, but in so doing they gave up practically everything else. From Oklahoma's record-cracking wishbone T the Cornhuskers removed the wide pitch to the halfback, mainly Greg Pruitt, but in doing so they relinquished the keep, the fullback into the middle and most of all the pass. To stop Pruitt, the Cornhuskers were forced to cover wide receiver Jon Harrison man for man, which they did ineffectually, thus allowing Harrison to catch four passes in critical situations, two for touchdowns. From Nebraska's imposing I spread and I slot, Oklahoma took away the passing game but gave up the power running attack. So the two teams swapped touchdowns evenly from scrimmage, four for four, and Oklahoma added a field goal. But always there lingered the one thing they had not traded, that sudden, shocking punt return by Nebraska's Johnny Rodgers.

In the end, it was a play in the beginning that made the difference: a 72-yard punt return by Rodgers.



The Greatest Game



RICH CLARKSON

It was one of those insanely thrilling things in which a single player, seized by the moment, twists, whirls, slips, holds his balance and, sprinting, makes it all the way to the goal line. Rodgers went 72 yards for the touchdown, one which keeps growing larger in the minds of all. And afterward, back on the Nebraska bench, he did what most everybody in Norman probably felt like doing: He threw up.

"I don't know what I did or what I was thinking about," Rodgers said later. "The return was set up to the right, but I saw a hole to the left and cut back. I do remember seeing Joe Blahak up ahead and thinking he would get a block for me."

Oklahoma's Joe Wylie had punted the ball high and deep enough with the help of the gushing wind. The Sooner coverage was down fast, so fast that all of the 61,826 at Owen Field, not to mention the TV audience, must have felt Rodgers would have been much wiser to consider a fair catch. It never entered his mind.

Heavens to Omaha if Rodgers didn't catch it with Greg Pruitt right on him. He took the blow, spun around on his own 30-yard line and planted his left hand on the Tartan Turf to keep from falling. Strangely, Pruitt's lick only turned Rodgers away from the grasp of another lunging Oklahoma tackler, Ken Jones. With that, however, Rodgers set sail to the right. But just as quickly he then darted back to the left, through a whole cluster of wine-colored Sooner jerseys. There the minute ended. Rodgers was open and away from the flow of the coverage that had developed, heading for the left sideline. Ahead, his friend Joe Blahak, a cornerback, inherited the chore of screening off or blocking the last man with a chance to make a tackle, the punter, Joe Wylie.

Wylie never had a good enough angle on Rodgers, although Johnny finally began to tire and Wylie is fast. It was academic; Blahak bumped Wylie, and from there on, Rodgers, who has been doing this sort of thing for two years—scoring on punts and making other big plays—could have crawled, retching every inch, and still scored.

What the punt return accomplished was monumental to the Nebraska cause. It ultimately allowed the Cornhuskers the luxury of an 11-point lead *twice* during the game, at 14-3 in the second quarter and at 28-17 late in the third quarter. It forced Oklahoma to go uphill all the way. And even when the Sooners' marvelous quarterback, Jack Mildren, overcame it twice,

Mildren kept bringing his Sooners back, throwing for two touchdowns and running for two more.



On the 74-yard final drive, the ball and the fate of the Huskers were in the hands of the tattered Tagge.

that bit of instinctive genius by Rodgers always had Nebraska's own brilliant quarterback, Jerry Tagge, in a position to retake the lead (or the game) with a single drive. Which Tagge coolly did when the scoreboard clock dictated that it was time, finally, and again, for the game to be won or lost by the Nebraska offense.

With 7:10 remaining in the fourth quarter, after Mildren had run for two touchdowns and passed for two more to Harrison, his high school buddy from Abilene, Texas; after Mildren—always uphill—had wishboned 467 yards in total offense for Oklahoma against the best defense in the country; indeed, after Jack Mildren had given the Sooners a 31–28 lead in a game that had every right, by now, certainly, to be running out of heroics, there was still Jerry Tagge, Johnny Rodgers, a refrigerator truck named Jeff Kinney and the Nebraska offense, which kept on coming like the disciplined Prussians they have become under Bob Devaney.

Devaney is normally a calm and likable man, resembling in that respect Oklahoma's Chuck Fairbanks. He had lost his cool only once during the game, he later admitted, when he turned to his defense on the sidelines and said facetiously, "Why don't you guys give Rich Glover some help once in a while?" This was in reference to the fact that Glover, the noseguard, sometimes seemed to be stopping Oklahoma single-handedly. But when that last offensive drive of 74 yards had to be accomplished, Devaney was back in character. He was willing to let Tagge handle it. Devaney stayed calm. So did Tagge. So did they all.

The steady pounding had begun to wear down the Oklahoma defense, which had proved better than expected, and Tagge knew it. The ground game had worked throughout the second half, with Kinney banging his way to the 174 yards (and four touchdowns) he would eventually wind up with. The frenzied Oklahoma fans could sing *Boomer Sooner* and scream, "Defense, defense," all they wanted, but Jerry Tagge knew it had come down to his game to win.

"Nobody said a word in the huddle but me," Tagge said. "We all just knew what had to be done."

The drive required 12 plays and more than five minutes. Tagge would break out of the huddle and up to the line and frequently call an audible. He would key on the Oklahoma safety, who had to worry about a pass, and then run to the opposite

The Greatest Game

side. He ran Kinney for a brutal 17 yards in which the big senior plainly broke three tackles. Tagge ran Kinney for 13 more yards on a play which saw the bruising I-back cut grindingly outside and hammer down a wall of weary Sooners.

However, in between these two efforts by Kinney, whose white jersey was beginning to look like confetti, Tagge had to improvise a play that probably had more instant horror in it for both coaching staffs than any movie Vincent Price ever made. It was a pure shrieker.

Nebraska had come to third down and eight at the Oklahoma 46, trailing by three, the clock running, 4½ minutes left and the Sooners' wishbone just waiting to get the ball one more time.

Now then, Jerry Tagge is not a fast man or very much of a scrambler, and while he is a splendid pro prospect because of his size and savvy, he does not have a quick release and he sometimes has trouble seeing any receiver other than the primary one—most often Johnny Rodgers.

Tagge called a pass right there, and the Oklahoma rush got

him in quick trouble. He had no alternative but to run for his life, if not the ball game. He went out to the right, looking, looking, with Oklahoma's best defensive end, Raymond Hamilton, closing in on him.

At the last second before being trapped for no more than a minimum gain, Tagge saw the squirming Rodgers between two Oklahoma linebackers. He drilled the ball low, but Rodgers sank to his knees and somehow caught it at the Sooner 35, just as he had somehow made that punt return. Enough for the first down. The Prussians were still coming.

Four plays and two minutes later it was second down at the Oklahoma six, and Tagge, who had been constantly glancing at the clock, called timeout. He knew that only a busted play could ruin Nebraska. So now Tagge wanted to chat with Devaney.

As Tagge remembers it, their conversation went something like this:

Tagge: "I know we can score, Coach, but I've been worried about eating up the time."





Kinney scored early (this TD put the Huskers up 21-17) and often (his fourth TD won the game).

Devaney: "We're going for the touchdown. There won't be any ties."

Tagge: "We'll get it."

Devaney: "What's your best play?"

Tagge: "I think it's the off-tackle with Jeff."

Devaney: "O.K. Let's run it without any mistakes."

Jerry Tagge and his friends did exactly that. Kinney slammed into the left side behind tackle Daryl White, knocked down somebody again and picked up four yards in the process. So Tagge called the same play and Kinney rammed into the end zone. That, plus the extra point, made it 35-31 and sent an estimated 30,000 ecstatic residents of Lincoln scurrying out to the airport to welcome the football team that would keep all of the town's cocktail waitresses in their red sweatshirts with the white No. 1's on them until New Year's Day at least. And probably longer. ■

THE BEST TEAM EVER?

When people get to talking about the best college football team ever to trot onto a field, you can be sure that one of the squads they'll mention is the Nebraska team of 1983. And, on paper anyway, they might be right. Or at least half right. Consider the offense: In 6' 3", 270-pound guard Dean Steinkuhler, Nebraska had the best lineman in the land in '83, the winner of both the Outland Trophy and the Lombardi Award. Turner Gill, a second-team All-America quarterback, was the Cornhuskers' resourceful leader. Wingback Irving Fryar would be taken as the No. 1 pick in the 1984 NFL draft by the New England Patriots. And Mike Rozier, the senior I-back, ran away with the Heisman Trophy, becoming only the second rusher in Division I history (after Marcus Allen) to gain more than 2,000 yards.

On offensive potency alone, the '83 Huskers have to be considered the school's best team ever and among the finest of all time. They set a Nebraska record by averaging 546.7 yards per game, and their 624 points over 12 games still stands as an NCAA mark. Seven of the eight offensive starters who were eligible for the pros at season's end wound up with contracts. After the Big Red machine laid waste to Syracuse 63-7 for its 15th win in a row during a 22-game streak, Bob Devaney, coach of the 1970 and '71 national champions at Lincoln, gave

Rozier (30) high-stepped to the Heisman, but '83 teammates Gill and Fryar were also in the running.

the '83 edition its due. "This team is the finest ever offensively," Devaney said, "but so far it's a little hard to evaluate them defensively."

Devaney was being diplomatic. In truth the Husker D of '83 was only O.K., with just two consensus all-Big Eight selections, linebacker Mike Knox and safety Bret Clark. If you're trying to come up with the best team in history, there are several that have displayed better balance, such as Notre Dame's 1924 bunch, which featured the Four Horsemen, and Michigan's point-a-minute men of 1901, who shut out every opponent. There were also teams that made their mark on defense, like Southern Cal in 1932, which yielded only 13 points. But for marquee offensive talent and sheer ability to steamroll, only the Army unit of Doc Blanchard and Glenn Davis in 1944, which outscored foes by an average of 52.1 points a game, should share the billing with the '83 Huskers.

The team had three serious Heisman contenders. Before the season it was decided that the Triplets—as Gill, Fryar and Rozier were known around Lincoln—would split the vote unless they united behind one candidate. So they cast their ballot for Rozier, calling him Michael Heisman. Rozier won and Gill finished fourth, while Fryar was not among the top-10 vote getters. "If I win it, I think we should split it three ways," Rozier said before the announcement. "I should get the legs, Turner should get the head, and Irving should get the arms."

Alas, it was a fingertip—that of Miami strong safety Ken Calhoun with 48 seconds left in the Orange Bowl—that kept the '83 Huskers from being unbeaten as well as unstoppable, as Miami upset Nebraska 31-30. There's nothing like a loss to deflate any argument for being the greatest. —HANK HERSCH



The '94

Hats off to the Cornhuskers, who overcame injury and



Season

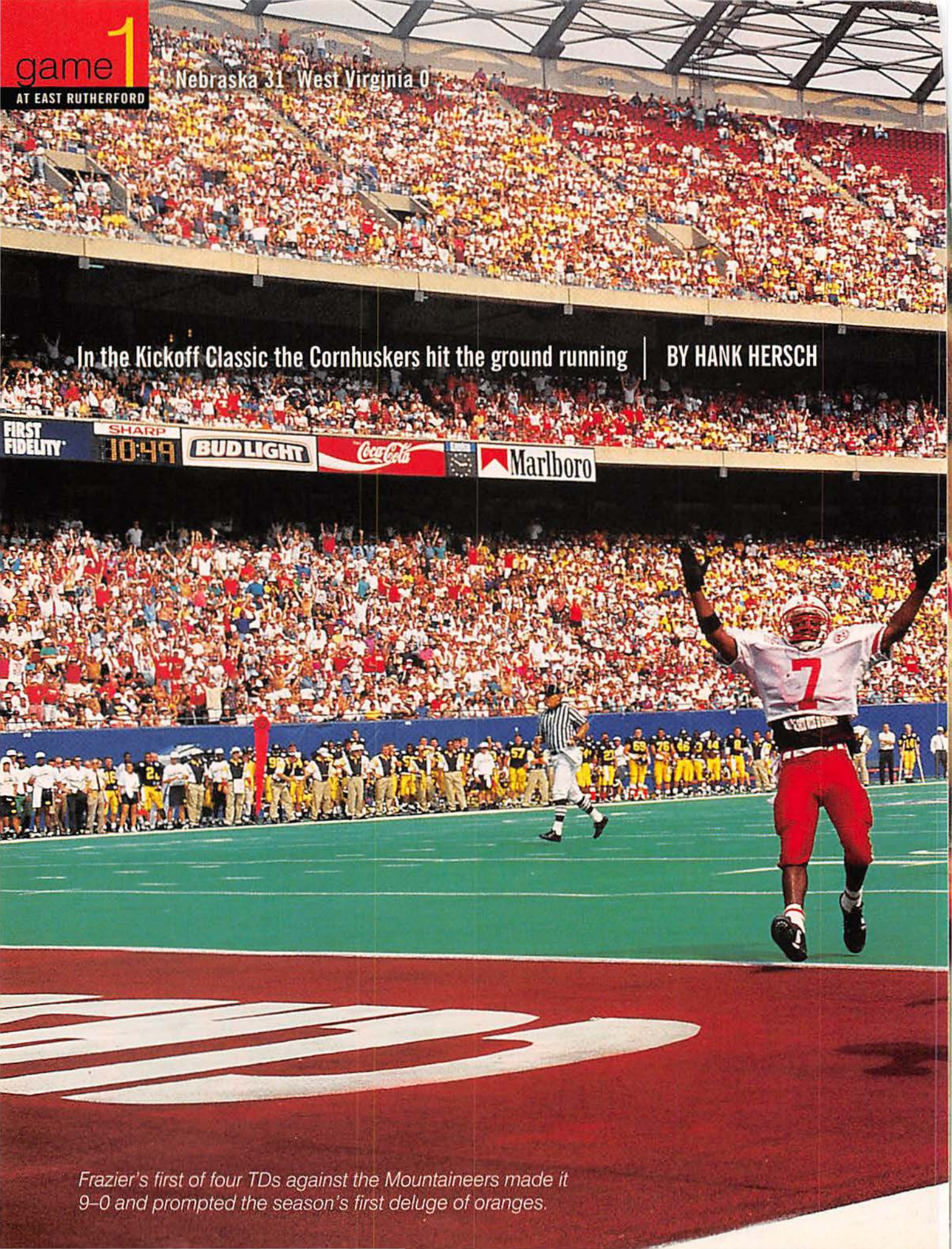
adversity to finish their schedule unbeaten and ranked No. 1

game 1
AT EAST RUTHERFORD

Nebraska 31 West Virginia 0

In the Kickoff Classic the Cornhuskers hit the ground running | BY HANK HERSCH

FIRST FIDELITY SHARP 10:49 BUD LIGHT Coca-Cola Marlboro



Frazier's first of four TDs against the Mountaineers made it 9-0 and prompted the season's first deluge of oranges.

Let's Go!





AL. TELEMANS

The Cornhuskers' 1994 opener, in the Kickoff Classic on Aug. 28, bore at least one similarity to their 1993 finale, that thrilling 18-16 thud against Florida State in the Orange Bowl: It was hot. As the Huskers squared off against West Virginia, the temperature climbed to the triple digits on the Giants Stadium turf, and the humidity in East Rutherford, N.J., was downright Miami-ish.

And that wasn't the only reminder of south Florida; early in the second quarter, hurled from the stands by the Husker faithful, was a bombardment of . . . *penalty flags*? "Excuse me," said the P.A. announcer, correcting his call. "Those were *oranges*."

The fruit was fired moments after third-year starter Tommie Frazier raced for a 25-yard touchdown on a quarterback op-

By the time Reggie Baul (7) hauled in a fourth-quarter pass, Osborne & Co. had the game wired.

tion—though it gave the Huskers a lead of only 10-0. Usually Nebraskans save their citrus showers for safer leads on more important occasions, like those crisp fall Saturdays against Oklahoma or Colorado. But on this date that marked the beginning of the '94 season, before 50 big-market sportswriters and a national TV audience, the airmailed message was clear: This team will repeat as Big Eight champs and return to Miami come Jan. 1.

The Big Red, ranked No. 4 in the preseason AP poll, began to make good its fans' symbolic word, exploding for 21 points

in the second quarter and proceeding to trash West Virginia 31-0. Frazier's first scoring jaunt proved to be his shortest of the afternoon; the others came from 27 and 42 yards out. Frazier had a hand in all four TDs, rushed for 137 yards on 12 carries, completed eight of 16 passes for 100 more and was named the Kickoff Classic MVP.

Meanwhile, the Nebraska defense, which had lost five of its 1993 starters to the NFL, pitched its first shutout in 20 games, preserved in the closing minutes by a Sedric Collins interception in the end zone. The Cornhuskers held the Mountaineers to eight yards net rushing, racking up 13 tackles for losses and holding running back Robert Walker, who had set a West Virginia rushing record in '93, to 46 yards on 12 carries. Middle linebacker Doug Colman, a Ventnor, N.J., native who had 106 of his nearest and dearest among the 58,233 in the stands, made eight tackles and recovered a fumble that set up a score.

West Virginia's only effective weapon was punter Todd Sauerbrun, who averaged 60 yards on nine kicks, including a school-record 90-yarder. West Virginia coach Don Nehlen surveyed the damage. "We got a lot of work to do on defense," he

DT Jason Peter dropped Mountaineer quarterback Eric Boykin, but the temperature kept rising.



JOHN IACONO

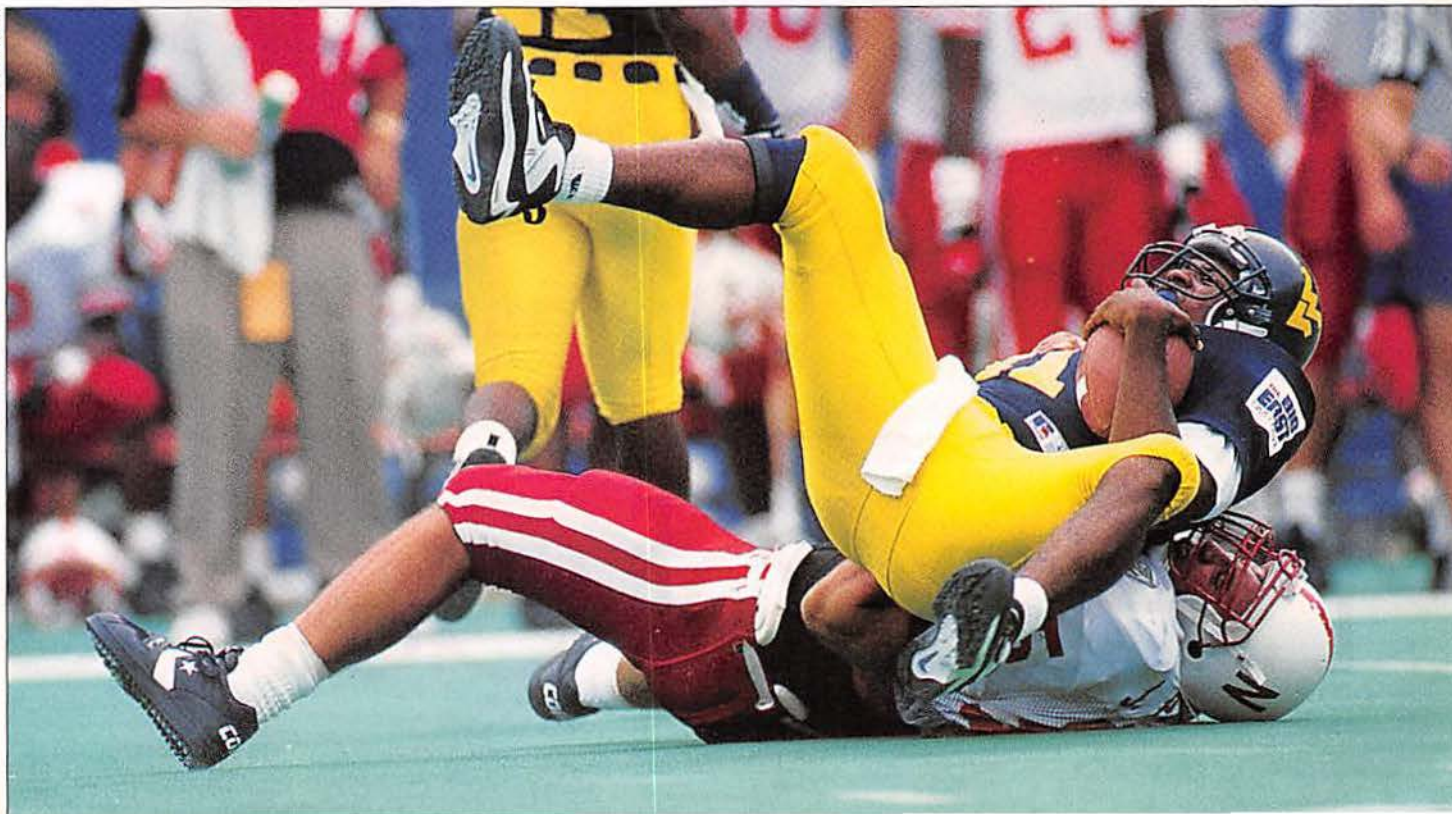
said. "We got a lot of work to do on offense. We got a lot of work to do everywhere."

The Nebraska picture was considerably brighter. "I don't think we started last season real well, but as the season went on, we started smoking," Husker defensive coordinator Charlie McBride said. "In the Orange Bowl we played about as good as we can play. It's just continuing now." Frazier, who did nothing to hurt his chances to win the Heisman Trophy,

was more guarded. "I don't think this game means that much," he said. "We have to wait four or five games to see how good this team is."

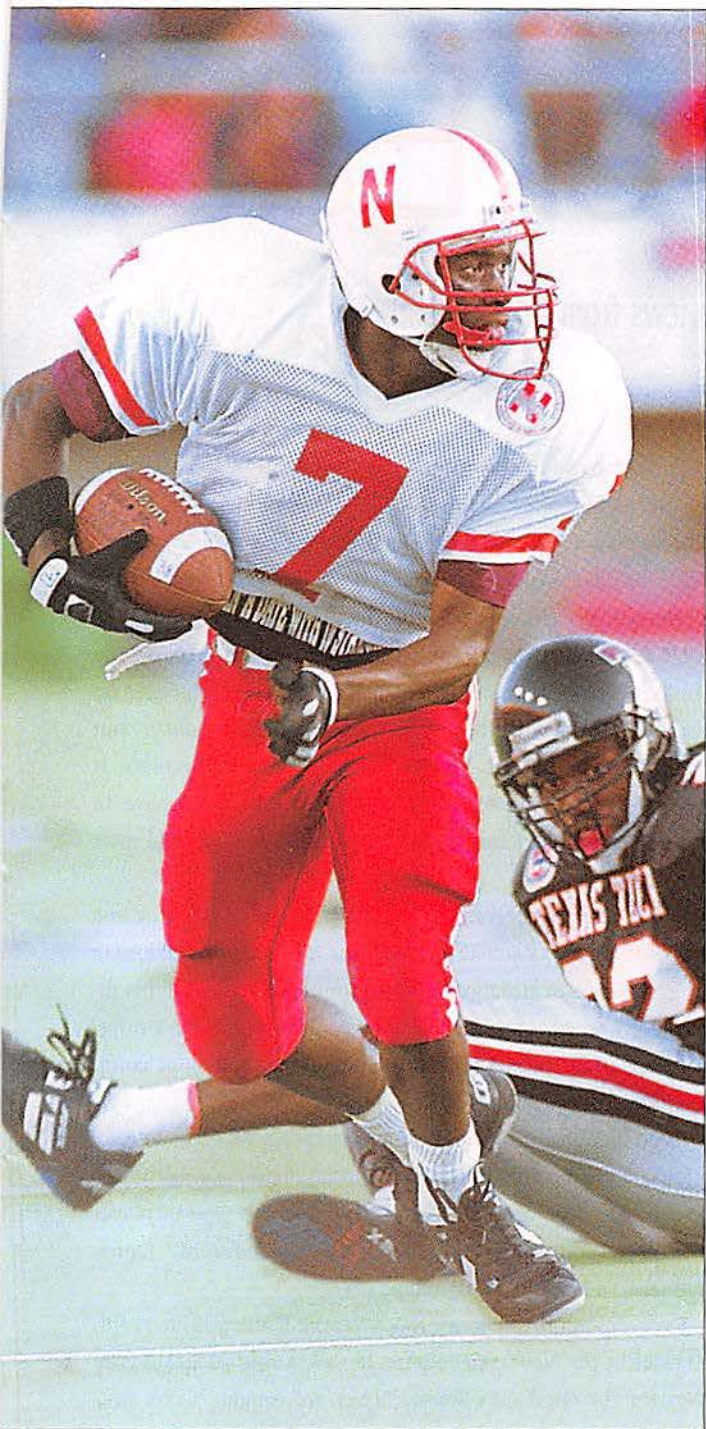
The Cornhuskers did have cause for concern: They turned the ball over five times. "Obviously, we're still a little disjointed in our execution," coach Tom Osborne said. "When you only have a short time to get ready, it's really hard to put a good, fluid performance together."

Osborne took some risk for the \$500,000 Kickoff payoff: A loss in a game with such exposure might have jeopardized Nebraska at the ballot box throughout the season. And even as it turned out, cynics could dismiss the victory as typical of the lion-to-lamb progression Cornhusker teams had tended to take in recent years; Nebraska won its ninth straight lid-lifter but had not won a bowl since '87. It would take more than a hailstorm of vitamin C to change that perception. ■





Delay of Game



The Huskers got off to an alarmingly sluggish start, but when their running game finally took off, Tech was wrecked

It may not have been a wake-up call, but it did bear a resemblance to a waking nightmare. Behind a freshman quarterback named Zebbie Lethridge, the Red Raiders of Texas Tech had taken the second-half kickoff, plowed 80 yards for a touchdown and cut Nebraska's lead to 14-9. Suddenly a sizable portion of the 32,768 assembled at Jones Stadium in Lubbock were taunting the No. 1-ranked Cornhuskers, flexing their vocal chords and their right arms in imitation of the Florida State fans' accursed Tomahawk Chop.

But just as suddenly, there was silence. Pushing the mute button for the Thursday-night ESPN audience was Cornhusker fullback Cory Schlesinger, the indefatigable blocker and infrequent runner who, on first-and-10 with about 12 minutes to go in the third period, roared up the gut for 41 yards. "It felt different," said Schlesinger, a 6-foot, 230-pound senior. "It's the first time I've gotten that many yards on a carry. I didn't know what to do except run."

Three plays later, on a third-and-nine call, Schlesinger ran for 24 yards more, popping through the middle and cutting left. I-back Lawrence Phillips then capped the 82-yard march with a touchdown dash from the two, and the 42-16 rout was on.

Nebraska's victory came gradually at first, then suddenly—just as it had in the opener. "We played a good football game," coach Tom Osborne said. "But I don't think we played an inspired football game."

Phillips followed Schlesinger's lead—and a masterful lead block by right tackle Zach Wiegert—to roar into the end zone untouched from 56 yards out on the Cornhuskers' next possession. He wound up with 175 yards on 19 carries. "Now we're getting to the point where when Lawrence touches the ball, we expect some special things to happen," said Nebraska assistant coach Frank Solich.

In all, the Cornhuskers rushed for 524 yards and left a lasting impression on the Red Raiders. "Their offensive line can move for the size they are," Tech middle linebacker Zach Thomas said. "That's what makes them a great team."

Alas, though, the Cornhuskers learned that they would have to play the rest of the season without one of their best players: Sophomore safety Mike Minter, the fastest man on the roster, tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee on a tackle in the third quarter. "There are several guys we can't afford to lose," Osborne said. "Mike definitely is one of them." —H.H.

Fancy footwork by Phillips and TE Reggie Baul (7) left the Red Raider defenders empty-handed.

Over Easy

Nebraska upended 13th-ranked UCLA, earning rave reviews from its opponent

On Friday night, the day before the Cornhuskers' home opener against No. 13 UCLA, the school held a pep rally at Memorial Stadium, the first one anybody in Lincoln could recall being held in the stadium. More than 35,000 fans turned out to watch a fireworks display and the unveiling of two 17-by-23-foot video screens mounted atop the stands at the southeast and northwest corners of the stadium, \$3.8 million worth of electronics paid for by 15 corporate sponsors. But if the near-midnight madness and nifty closed circuitry left a suggestion that Nebraska was entering an era of hype and high tech, it vanished 17 hours later when the second-ranked Big Red rolled to a typically low-glitz and enormously impressive 49-21 victory.

Before a crowd of 75,687—Nebraska's 196th straight sell-out—the Huskers relied on the staples of powers past: an explosive I-back, a battering offensive line and an option quarterback with a gift for split-second decisions. As a true freshman a year before, Lawrence Phillips had replaced starter Damon Benning and rushed for 137 yards against UCLA, which is only 30 miles from his California home in West Covina. This time he raced for a career-best 178 yards on 19 carries, including a 60-yard burst of speed and power down the sideline that set up a crucial third-quarter touchdown. He broke free around left end and finished by dragging one Bruin defender five yards and bulling over a second to gain five more. "The best run of my career," the 6-foot, 200-pound Phillips called it.

"I told myself I wasn't going to watch any replays," said Nebraska assistant coach Frank Solich, referring to the big new video screens. "But I did sneak a peek at that one."

Tom Osborne certainly liked what he saw. "A lot of talent," he said of Phillips, "and getting better."

The offensive line uprooted the Bruins for 484 yards rushing, the highest mark against UCLA in the "modern era" of the school. "That was the most fun I've ever had on a football field," said Nebraska guard Joel Wilks. "We'd just smash them off the ball, drive them back 10 yards, get up and celebrate."

UCLA linebacker Donnie Edwards was stunned by the Huskers' show of force. "It seemed like they had a blocker on everybody," Edwards said. "Like their whole line would get out on all fours and crawl. They were trying to cut everybody. It was difficult coming from the back side because I'd have to jump over people. I can't believe how far down the field their line was."

And quarterback Tommie Frazier lived up to the pregame praise of UCLA coach Terry Donahue, who had placed him in "the elite class of athletes in college football." Frazier deftly directed the attack, checking off to take advantage of the Bruins' unbalanced D, summoning up a marvelous medley of countersweeps, draws and dives.

Even though Frazier himself amassed only 88 yards in total offense, Donahue heightened his appraisal after seeing the QB operate up close and on AstroTurf. "He's the type of player that makes your whole football team totally different," Donahue said, "a Michael Jordan-type player."

Even though Bruin quarterback Wayne Cook was intercepted twice by the Nebraska defense, he saved most of his superlatives for the Big Red offense. "They are tough," Cook said. "I'll tell you what, when we were on the sidelines and I'd watch their offense, it was awesome. They just don't seem to have a weak point. If they're going to get beat, it's going to be because of their defense."

—H.H.

Benning's end zone somersault ran the score to 26-7 as the Husker offense battered the Bruins.



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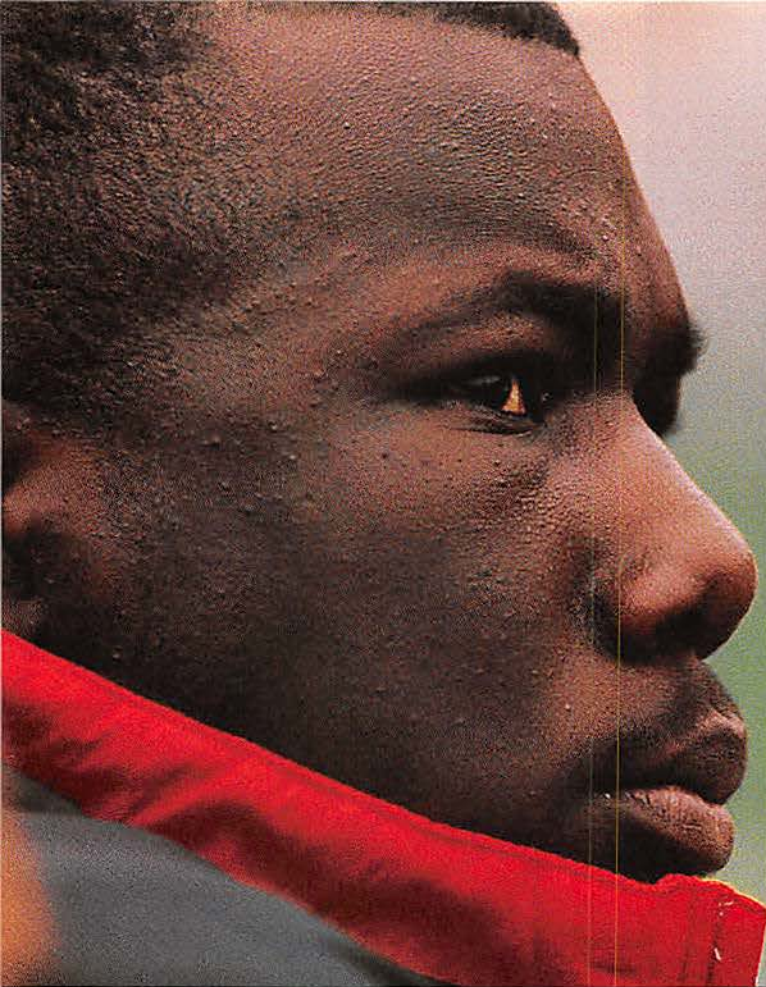
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Big Red Rout

Tommie Frazier and friends wiped out Pacific,
but little did they suspect that misfortune
was on the horizon

How best to quantify Nebraska's blowout of Pacific at Memorial Stadium, a wallop so thorough that not even the 70-21 score does it justice? It measured a 5 on the depth chart: Tom Osborne went that many players deep into his bench, deploying 104 of his 111 available athletes, most before halftime. It ranked No. 7 on the alltime list of yardage accumulated by the Cornhuskers, who totaled 699. And it registered nine Nebraska players in the score book with touchdowns.

Nick Sellers, Pacific's backup quarterback, could barely bring himself to watch what was going on. "It seemed like every time I looked up at that HuskerVision thing," Sellers said, "another guy was scoring."

By the reckoning of Tiger coach Chuck Shelton, Nebraska's performance was off the charts. "I told my kids after the game," said Shelton, "that I've coached against teams that went to the Rose Bowl, that won the Big Eight, the Pac-10 . . . and this is the best team I've coached against." And this despite the fact that Nebraska's starters played less than one quarter.

After scoring on each of their first seven possessions, the Cornhuskers led 49-0 with 6:22 left in the first half, tying their

record for most points in a half set in a 63-42 win over Oklahoma State in 1988. "I talked to the officials about calling off the second half," Shelton said, "and they wouldn't."

Osborne had mixed feelings about the game's one-sidedness. "To be real selfish about developing a team for this year, we maybe needed to play longer today," he said. "I don't know if we get a whole lot better playing a quarter."

Nebraska defensive tackle Terry Connealy, a senior starter, was less equivocal. "Getting all those guys in the game will be something that will make us better as a team," he said. "Getting into your first game is a feeling you can't substitute. Now we've all got something to talk about in the locker room."

Tommie Frazier took just nine snaps at quarterback, completing one of two passes and leading two touchdown drives—one capped by Lawrence Phillips's 74-yard run—before retiring for the afternoon. Frazier's backup, Brook Berringer, ran in once from six yards out and threw for three more scores. Berringer's backup, Matt Turman, ran 14 plays before giving way to the fourth-stringer, 5' 8", 180-pound Adam Kucera, who was making his first appearance since his promotion from

After Frazier (above) retired early with a sore leg, Berringer (18) stepped up and threw for three TDs.

team manager to scout team at the end of fall camp, when injuries to other quarterbacks had depleted the depth chart. For the Pacific game, Kucera's father, Bill, a former Cornhusker grad assistant, was on hand after flying from the family home in Stockton, Calif. When Adam appeared in the fourth quarter, he was accompanied by chants of "Rudy! Rudy!" He threw one pass, which fell incomplete, and rushed one time for four yards.

Even Kucera's backup got into the act: Freshman Ryan Held lined up under center and became the 16th Cornhusker to carry the ball against the Tigers, although he was stopped for no gain. When the season started, Held wasn't even on the depth chart.

The Pacific players seemed thrilled by the chance to compete in a sold-out stadium bathed in red, and against one of the

fabled programs in college football. "I wish we had more to show for it," wideout Damon Bowers said, "but I'm just really glad to be a part of this experience." The school didn't go away empty-handed: Pacific was given a \$400,000 guarantee for playing—about 30% of the football program's yearly budget.

When asked how he improved during the game, Frazier could joke afterward. "My passing," he said. "I completed 50 percent." He needed the rest, having been bothered by a calf bruise he suffered against UCLA. But amid all the ridiculous numbers and team togetherness that resulted from this laughter, no one could have guessed that it would be the last time Frazier, a front-runner for the Heisman Trophy, would take the field for the Big Red during the regular season. —H.H.



DAVID WALDBERG (2)





BILL FRANKS

Sideline Pattern

Tommie Frazier was reduced to the role of spectator as the Cornhuskers spotted the Cowboys a 14-point lead before rolling on

For 23 straight games Tom Osborne had counted on the quick feet and quicker mind of Tommie Frazier to direct the Cornhuskers' option attack. But on Sept. 25, doctors discovered that what they had initially diagnosed as a bruise in Frazier's right calf was actually a blood clot behind his knee. In a few days, after further testing, Frazier underwent minor surgery to tie off the vein that appeared to be causing the problem. He would spend the rest of 1994 on the sidelines, taking blood thinners to stave off more clotting and crossing his fingers that he would be able to play again.

So during the Wyoming game at Memorial Stadium, Frazier, dressed in a warmup jacket and jean shorts, spent much of his time lying atop a table and watching the game from that position. Osborne, meanwhile, placed the starting offense in less familiar hands, those of backup Brook Berringer. Through most of the first half, though, the hot hands belonged not to Berringer but to Wyoming freshman Jeremy Dombek, a red-shirt from Henryetta, Okla., the town that once produced a slightly more renowned Cowboy quarterback—Troy Aikman.

Doing his best Aikman imitation, Dombek placed Nebraska in its first hole of the season, spurring Wyoming to a 21-7 lead with 2:12 left in the second quarter. (Although this was the first

Tests revealed a blood clot behind Frazier's right knee, raising concerns about his future.



BILL FRANKS

Wyoming's Dombek was caught between a ref and a hard place—Husker linebacker Jared Tomich.

Husker point deficit, it was by no means the first time the team felt at a loss. Coming into the Wyoming game, Nebraska trailed Florida in the AP poll, a position the Huskers found themselves in after voters dropped them from No. 1 to No. 2 when they were idle the week after routing West Virginia.)

The hurry-up offense has not been a trademark of the Cornhuskers, partly because of their ground-based attack and partly because they usually have matters so firmly in hand that they don't need heroics. But now they did—and Berringer, a 6' 4", 210-pound junior from Goodland, Kans., provided them.

Taking over at the Nebraska 36, Berringer completed seven straight passes to five receivers, the touchdown coming on a five-yard bootleg sprint. The march gave the Big Red—and Berringer—a hefty hunk of momentum for ultimately securing a 42–32 victory. “That drive helped his confidence,” quarterbacks coach Turner Gill said. “No doubt about it.”

“We never panicked,” offensive tackle Rob Zatechka said afterward. “If it were the third quarter and we still weren’t doing anything, that’s when we would have.”

By the time the second half rolled around, there appeared to be little cause for concern. On the Cornhuskers’ first three possessions of the third period—two of them launched after inter-

ceptions, by Tyrone Williams and Barron Miles—Berringer led Nebraska into the end zone and on to a 35–21 lead. He wound up connecting on 15 of 22 passes for 131 yards, rushing for a career-high 74 yards on 12 carries and scoring three touchdowns.

“Brook Berringer was great today,” Osborne said. “A lot of times, if you’re taking over and things aren’t going well, you tend to get jittery. But he never did.”

“We came out a little sluggish,” Berringer said, “but we still scored 42 points, and that was good enough against this team.”

The Cornhuskers made sure it was enough with some rugged work against the Cowboys’ Ryan Christopherson, the nation’s No. 5 rusher at the time. Christopherson tried the Nebraska line 12 times and came up dead empty: zero net yards. Meanwhile, Lawrence Phillips, the country’s third-ranked rusher, cracked triple digits for the fifth straight game, gaining 168 yards on 27 carries. His third touchdown, from eight yards out, came with 5:28 to play after Wyoming fumbled a punt.

The absence of Frazier and the peskiness of Wyoming were tribulation enough for the Huskers. But there would be more. After the game Berringer, complaining of shortness of breath, was taken to Bryan Memorial Hospital for an examination. And when its results were announced, there was a collective shortness of breath across the state. Berringer’s left lung was partially collapsed; his status was uncertain. Nebraska’s season was beginning to seem more snakebit than charmed. —H.H.



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To the Rescue

Out went Brook Berringer, in came walk-on Matt Turman, and down went Oklahoma State



The sight was ominous for the 75,453 at Memorial Stadium. With Nebraska clinging to a 9-3 lead at halftime, quarterback Brook Berringer climbed into a squad car and headed for the student health center on the Lincoln campus. One week after a pummeling by the Wyoming defense partially collapsed his left lung, Berringer had been drilled again, this time by Oklahoma State. Not even the flak jacket he was wearing could fully cushion the blow, delivered with about five minutes remaining in the second quarter. "I could feel right away there was trouble," Berringer said later. "It wasn't going to be likely that I would be playing in the second half."

After an exam at the health center, Berringer would need to have his lung inflated again after the 30% to 40% collapse. So Tom Osborne handed the controls of the second-ranked Huskers over to Matt Turman, a 5' 11", 165-pound sophomore from Wahoo, Neb., who had only carried the ball seven times and thrown five passes in his career. Turman wisely proceeded to hand the ball off to Lawrence Phillips, who carried a career-high 33 times for a career-high 221 yards. That was more than enough to bring the Cornhuskers an emotional 32-3 victory.

Not that Turman didn't contribute mightily. With the Huskers still up 9-3 late in the third quarter, he directed a ground-bound procession downfield. After Turman's two-yard gain to the Cowboy five-yard line, 6' 5", 260-pound defensive end Jevon Langford roughed up the quarterback, drawing a personal-foul penalty that set up Phillips's TD lunge on the next snap. If Langford wanted to test Turman, the quarterback was ready.

Originally a defensive back, Turman had asked to be

His passes were a rare sight, but the Turmanator, a former receiver, did everything needed to win.



switched to offense and played receiver before moving under center. "I'm a tough guy," he said after the game. "That touchdown was big for the team. You could see everybody had confidence that we could drive and score whether I was the quarterback or not."

On Nebraska's next possession Turman found Abdul Muhammad with a 23-yard pass—his only completion in four attempts—and once again Phillips took the ball into the end zone, this time from seven yards out. "It became an inside-run drill," said Oklahoma State coach Pat Jones. "They just lined up and whipped us."

The Huskers did nothing less on the other side of the ball,

TE Mark Gilman was pushed out at the two, setting up a touchdown by Phillips, his first of three.

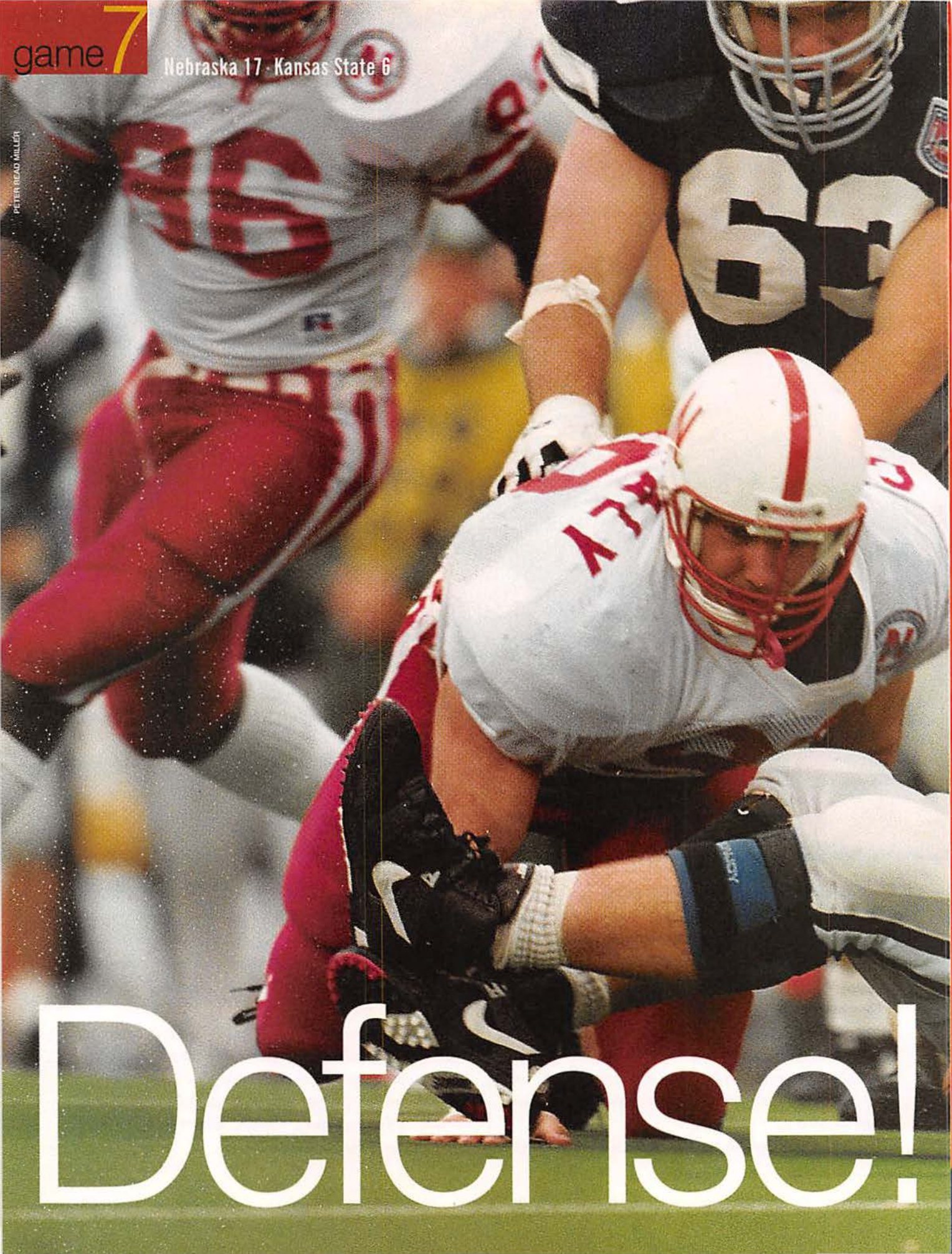
even though starting safety Tony Veland spent the second half on the sidelines, where he waited just in case he was needed as the emergency quarterback.

Without Tommie Frazier and with Berringer's future in doubt, Osborne realized that against unbeaten Kansas State in Manhattan the following week he might have to start the Wahoo Walk-on—or, as he was now being called, the Turmanator. "Maybe we'll hold auditions," Osborne said. "I know some [reporters] here who could audible." —H.H.

game 7

Nebraska 17 - Kansas State 6

PETER READ MILLER



Defense!



The Cornhusker defenders chased down a fourth-quarter fumble by May (5).

The Nebraska D rose to the occasion and shut down Chad May and K-State

BY JOHN GARRITY

It was like watching a splendid, sleek animal escape the jaws of a trap by gnawing off its own leg. Second-ranked Nebraska, forced to start a third-string quarterback who was not well-suited to running the team's vaunted option attack, was facing a very good—and unbeaten—Kansas State squad. So the Husker offense, doing what it had to do to survive, threw out the most-worn pages of its playbook and went instead with the only strategy that might work: guileless runs behind the bruising, churning line that averaged 295 pounds a man.

The result—a rainy, gloomy, penalty-filled 17-6 Cornhusker victory—left a damp crowd at K-State's Wagner Field wonder-

DT Terry Conneally loomed large, blunting the running attack of Kansas State and J.J. Smith.



PETER READ MILLER

ing if it had witnessed greatness in the face of adversity or something less grand: luck, maybe. "They're beatable," Wildcat quarterback Chad May said of the Huskers after the game. "A great team doesn't make many mistakes, executes every play and is solid at every position. I don't think they're a great team."

Sour grapes aside, it was hard to argue with May's logic, and the day after the game the pollsters apparently agreed, dropping Nebraska to No. 3, behind Penn State and Colorado. Indeed, the Cornhuskers scarcely resembled the behemoth that had averaged 44 points in their first six games. The starter at quarterback for this game, the diminutive Matt Turman, was pressed into service to buy time for Brook Berringer, with the hopes that Berringer's lung would be given adequate time to heal.

Turman's job, it quickly became clear, was to take snaps and deliver the ball without delay to Lawrence Phillips, who cradled it in his arms 31 times and ran with it for 117 yards. So foreseeable was each Phillips carry that it might have been announced with a fanfare of trumpets, but he gamely provided the Cornhuskers with a 7-0 first-quarter lead by carrying the ball on every play of a six-play, 28-yard drive. "Coach thought they might be susceptible to smash-mouth football," Turman said afterward.

Unable to present so much as a threat to pass, however, Nebraska sputtered on its next four possessions, and Berringer took over with the Huskers ahead 7-6 and time running out in the first half. Berringer's mandate, Tom Osborne conceded later, was to make it look as if he might run with the ball or pass it; his actual task was to move the offense without suffering a lung-deflating hit like those that had put him in for X-rays as recently as the previous Friday morning. "They knew, when Turman was in there, we weren't going to throw much," said Osborne, "and when Berringer was in there, we weren't going to run the option much."

That left the success of the offense in the hands of the grunts. Combined, the two Cornhusker quarterbacks completed just four of 11 passes for 52 yards as K-State held the Nebraska offense to 262 yards, its lowest total of the season.

But it was K-State's May who was hanging his head at game's end. This Big Eight matchup was May's big chance to gain the attention he felt was his due for leading Futility U—Kansas State had gone 1-31-1 from 1987 to '89—to football respectability. The previous year, in Lincoln, he had embarrassed the Cornhuskers with a conference-record 489 yards passing, albe-



RICHARD MACKSON

The maligned Husker linebackers came through as Donta Jones helped ruin May's day.

it in a 45–28 Wildcat loss; entering this game his team was ranked No. 16, and he was on the threshold of Heisman Trophy consideration, having thrown a Big Eight–record 188 consecutive passes without an interception and having led K-State to a 4–0 start.

May, a cocky leader, had been a renegade who'd dyed his hair garish colors when he played at Cal State–Fullerton before transferring to Kansas State in 1992. And with him at the helm, the Wildcats seemed to have their best chance of ending

a humiliating 25-game losing streak to Nebraska that dated to '68, before May or any of his teammates was born. Instead, the Cornhuskers sacked May six times and had him throwing to empty patches of wet turf as often as to open receivers. He threw a 29-yard touchdown strike to Mitch Running on the second play of the second quarter, rousing the home fans, but another first-half drive, along with May's no-interception streak, ended when Nebraska linebacker Troy Dumas picked off a pass over the middle and ran it back 54 yards.

"When the ball gets sloppy, heavy and lopsided," said Ber-ringer, "it's kind of hard to throw." But May refused to plead weather as a factor in his 22-for-48, 249-yard performance.



RICHARD JACKSON

"I was not very good," he said. "Everybody was looking for me to come up with the big play, and I can't come up with them every time."

Cornhusker defensive coordinator Charlie McBride was more inclined to credit the Nebraska victory to the play of his secondary and linebackers, whom he described as "unfairly maligned" since the previous year's failure to shut down May in Lincoln. "We read in the papers where their players said they knew our seams and they'd pick us apart," said an amused McBride. "And yesterday I overheard stuff in the hotel—our own fans saying, 'Our only problem is our secondary.'"

There was no such problem this time. May's inability to penetrate the end zone, coupled with K-State's impotent ground attack (minus seven yards, counting 53 yards lost on sacks), repeatedly gave the ball to the Nebraska offense and its tireless front line. Said 300-pound Nebraska tackle Zach Wiegert, "It seemed like the holes started getting bigger and bigger as the day wore on." Big enough, by the fourth quarter, for Phillips and junior fullback Jeff Makovicka to eat up yardage in bigger chunks. Makovicka scored on a 15-yard burst to put the Corn-

With Nebraska down to its third-string QB, Phillips had to carry the load: 31 times for 117 yards.

huskers ahead 14-6 with 11:01 left, and Nebraska clinched the victory on a 24-yard Darin Erstad field goal at 1:32.

"You know what they're going to run," said K-State linebacker Percell Gaskins. "You just have to stop it, and today we couldn't."

Some Husker players could appreciate the Wildcats' frustration. "They were looking at this game as their road to the Orange Bowl," said Phillips. "They were undefeated, so they had as big a right as us to think about the Orange Bowl."

And now? "I guess not anymore," he said, smiling.

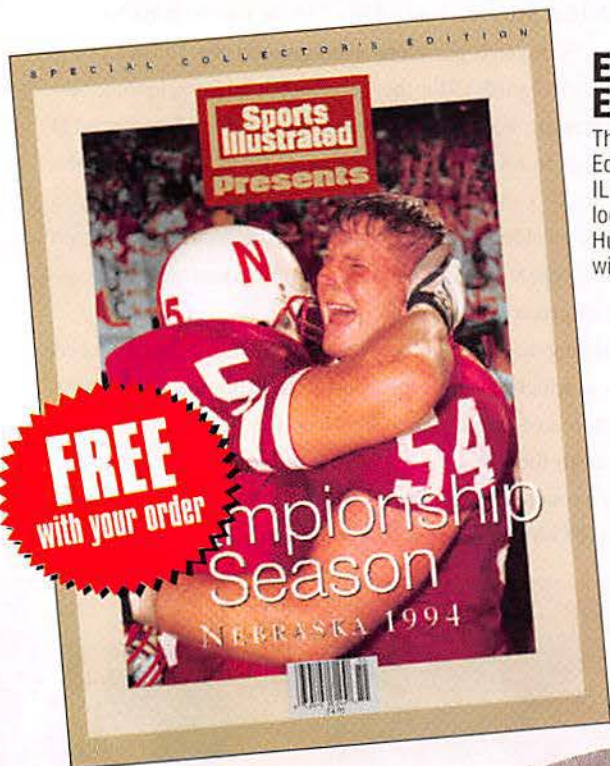
Unanswered was the larger question: Could 7-0 Nebraska, with five conference games remaining—including an Oct. 29 clash with second-ranked Colorado in Lincoln—limp to a national championship with quarterbacks who couldn't throw downfield, run the option or take hits without leaking air?

For all doubters it was wise to remember this: Wounded animals are the most dangerous.

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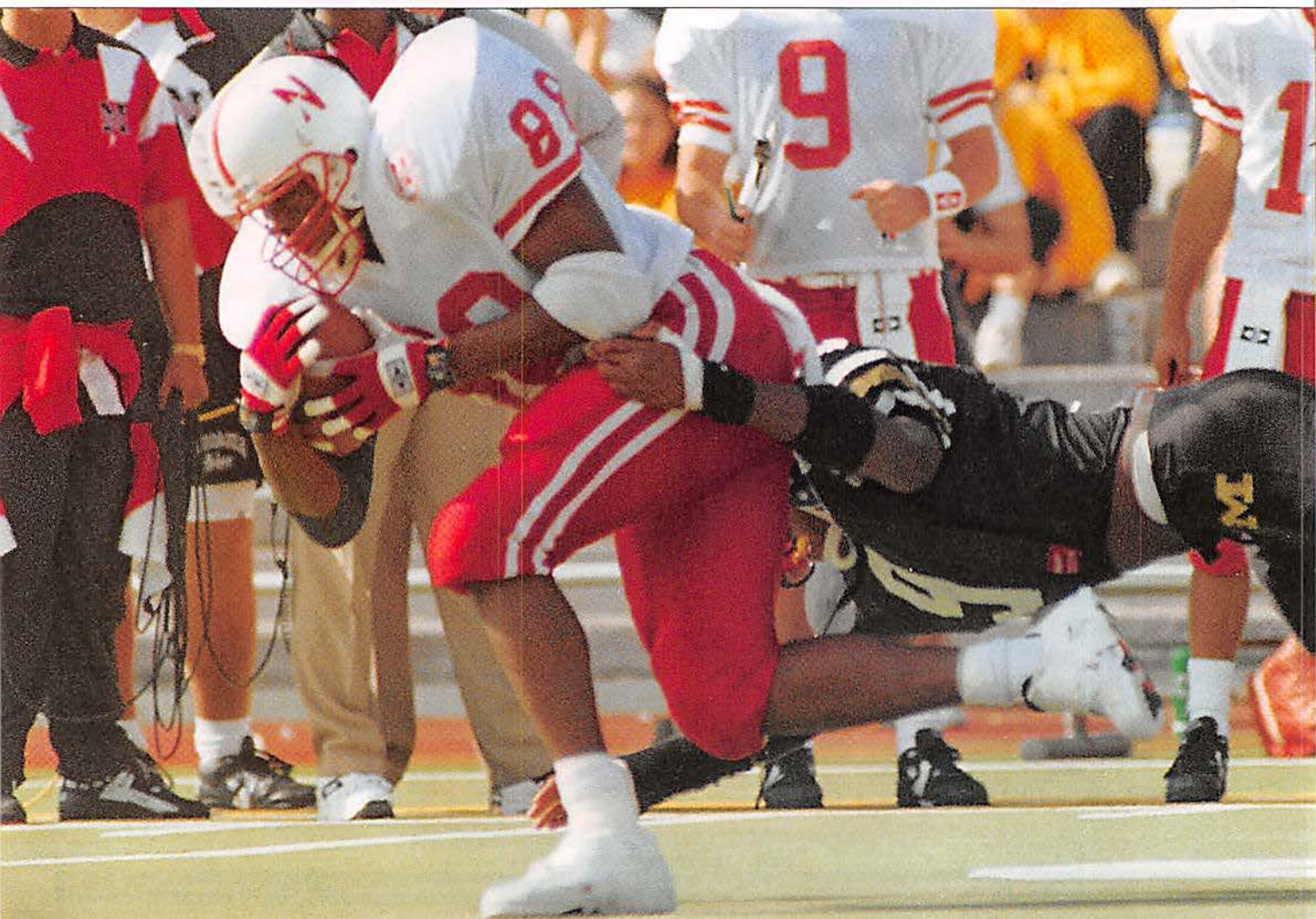
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Tiger Taming

In mashing Missouri, the defense, especially 5' 8" cornerback Barron Miles, continued to make a name for itself

The Cornhusker offensive style has been so lopsided for so long that it has become standard to characterize the team as one-dimensional. After all, the Huskers entered their Big Eight date at Missouri ranked No. 1 in the nation in rushing offense (a 398.6-yards-per-game average) and No. 102 in passing offense (104.2 yards). But the Nebraska defenders, in their new 4-3 alignment, were playing some of the most well-balanced D in the land. In a 42-7 triumph at Faurot Field, they limited the Tigers to 48 yards rushing, capping a three-game stretch in which they yielded a total of 81 yards on the ground. And when Missouri went to the air, Nebraska simply countered with cornerback Barron Miles.

Following up his school-record performance against Kansas State—in which he broke up six passes—Miles made his fourth interception of the season in the third quarter and returned it 27 yards, to the Missouri 23. That set up the first of three second-half touchdown passes by Brook Berringer, who hit tight end Mark Gilman from one yard out to give the Huskers a 21-0



lead. On the previous series Miles had forced a fumble on the Nebraska one-yard line, stopping a Tiger drive and preserving the Cornhuskers' momentum.

"I put my face on the football, and it came out," said Miles, a senior from Roselle, N.J. "I don't know if it's luck, but if it is, it's on my side right now."

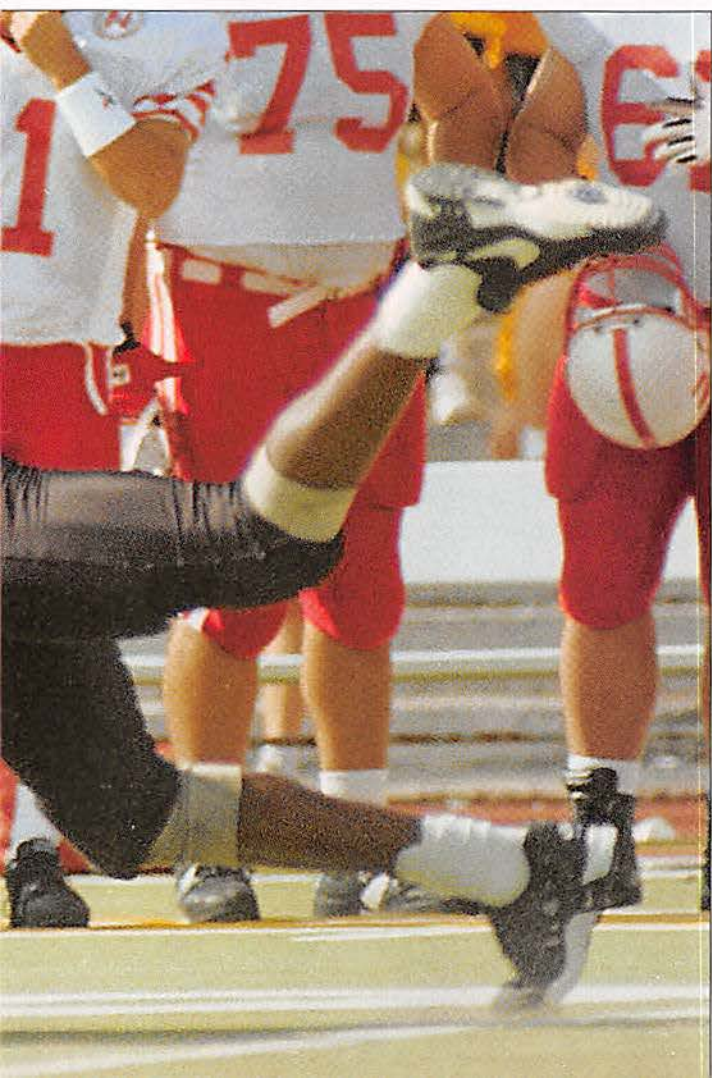
At 5' 8" and 165 pounds, Miles was establishing himself among the nation's leaders in big plays per square inch, playing larger and larger in the absence of injured safety Mike Minter. "You look at him and figure he plays at Doane or Wesleyan or Lincoln Southern, but he's a tremendous athlete," said Nebraska defensive backs coach George Darlington. "Week in and week out, day in and day out, he just gives you what you want."

The same could be said of Lawrence Phillips: Despite a sprained left thumb, he rolled up 110 yards on 22 carries. The Huskers rushed for 330 yards, marking the 60th straight time that they had gone over 300 yards and won. "I was happy with



L.G. PATTERSON

While tight end Eric Alford (88) dragged his lone defender, the Cornhusker D went five-on-one.



L.G. PATTERSON

the way we played today," Phillips said. "We overcame some things to win, and that's the main thing."

That could also apply to Berringer, who once again suited up and played, although his reinflated left lung was subject to collapsing if he took a hard hit. In addition to connecting with Gilman, who made the first touchdown catch of his career, Berringer hooked up with split end Brendan Holbein for a 30-yard score, then threw a 43-yard touchdown pass to split end Reggie Baul.

"We ran the option as little as possible today," Berringer said. "The coaches didn't want me to take any unnecessary hits. But I came out of the game all right and feel pretty good."

The same could not be said of his backup, Matt Turman, who sprained his right shoulder with three minutes left in the game, when he took a late hit along the Nebraska sideline. Another game, another quarterback injury.

"When Missouri took the run away from us a little bit, we looked to the pass," Tom Osborne said. "We tried to take what the defense was giving us."

And once again, the Cornhusker D was giving precious little in return.

—H.H.



A Husker sack, one of four in the game, had Stewart (10) under siege.

Stampede!

The Big Red trampled the Buffaloes and grabbed hold of No. 1 | BY S.L. PRICE



THE RED IS DEAD. That's what the sign said. That's what the word was. You heard it in Boulder and around the Orange Bowl and in Tallahassee; you heard it everywhere college football was king. But you felt it too, in New York and Chicago and in all the impatient places where people had had it with the lumbering stiffness of Lincoln, those stolid farmboys who win, win, win except when it counts most. THE RED IS DEAD. How could it have been otherwise? The Cornhuskers' splendid quarterback was gone with a blood clot, his backup had felt his lung collapse twice, and *his* backup—a walk-on, for god's sake—had a deep bruise in his shoulder. Even the most merciful appeared to have lost patience with the Huskers. "It's like somebody did something wrong around here," said linebacker Ed Stewart, "and God was paying us back."

THE RED IS DEAD. That's what the sign stuck on the locker room wall behind Rashaan Salaam's head said after the thousands of scarlet-garbed fanatics had flowed like a red river onto the field. Hours before, Salaam, Colorado's star running back, had first seen those words, printed as a statement of fact. And who expected that declaration to change? Who figured that Nebraska, albeit No. 3 in the land, would so dominate, so emphatically humble college football's second-ranked miracle boys from Boulder that this brash epitaph would quickly evolve into a withering hope, then a mockery? Gone in the 24-7 drubbing was the Buffaloes' dramatic march through the season. Gone were the Heisman Trophy hopes of Colorado quarterback Kordell Stewart. "Tell the guys from Nebraska to go get that national championship," Salaam said, "because they deserve it."





That's right: Nebraska and national title in the same breath. In this season without rhyme, in this system without reason, it seemed just that the Huskers had set themselves up for another shot—however painful—at the big prize. For even as the game's grand pooh-bahs have tried to dictate a format for an annual championship, college football has remained as manageable as a wet bar of soap. The day after the victory over Colorado, the AP poll named Nebraska its No. 1 team, while the coaches' poll kept Penn State in the top spot. The Nittany Lions were gearing up for a Rose Bowl showdown against some second-rate opponent from the Pac-10. Undefeated and ineligible Auburn still lurked, a possible shadow champion. Alabama was unheralded but still unbeaten. A mess indeed.

But for sheer weirdness, nothing could surpass Nebraska. This was the team that had gone to the Orange Bowl five times in the last 11 years—and all five times lost to Florida State or Miami by a combined score of 121–63. Until the victory over Colorado, the Cornhuskers hadn't beaten a top-five opponent since 1987, following the classic Husker formula for a season: nine wins, a Big Eight title, disappointment on New Year's Day. In routing Colorado, Nebraska nailed down the first of these ingredients for 1994, took the driver's seat for the second and inspired fears of the third. One Orange Bowl committee member estimated that, of the 200 members of his group, only one, a Nebraska alumnus, would wish to see the Cornhuskers in Miami again—and Husker coach Tom Osborne didn't exactly seem to relish the thought of a return appearance. Minutes after the game ended, he began pressing committeemen for a

Husker fans knew the game was on the line, and Nebraska's beef proved superior to the Buffs'.

non-Florida opponent. It wasn't a sympathetic audience: These were the same compassionate souls who had joked earlier about sending Osborne an autographed picture of Miami coach Dennis Erickson.

Officially, of course, there was no such Husker bashing. "We'd be delighted to have such a highly ranked team," said Orange Bowl president Ed Williamson. "Since this is the final year of our tie-in with the Big Eight, maybe it's appropriate. They've been there."

This time, though, there was a feeling that things just might be different, because this was a different type of Nebraska team. First, the normally polite Huskers were clearly through apologizing for their methodical, grain-thresher offense. "Who are we going to send down to Miami, a Colorado team whose butt we just kicked?" said Nebraska tackle Rob Zatechka. "We're kind of like the Buffalo Bills: We're back. Live with it."

Nebraska has always produced a supremely competent collection of athletes, cerebral teams marked by flawless technique and a startling lack of emotion. Confronted with adversity only on Jan. 1, when they suddenly face quicker and more fiery opponents, the Cornhuskers always seemed to crumble—until the '93 season came to an end. Then Tommie Frazier led them into a national title game against Florida State in the Orange Bowl and outplayed Heisman winner Charlie Ward; only



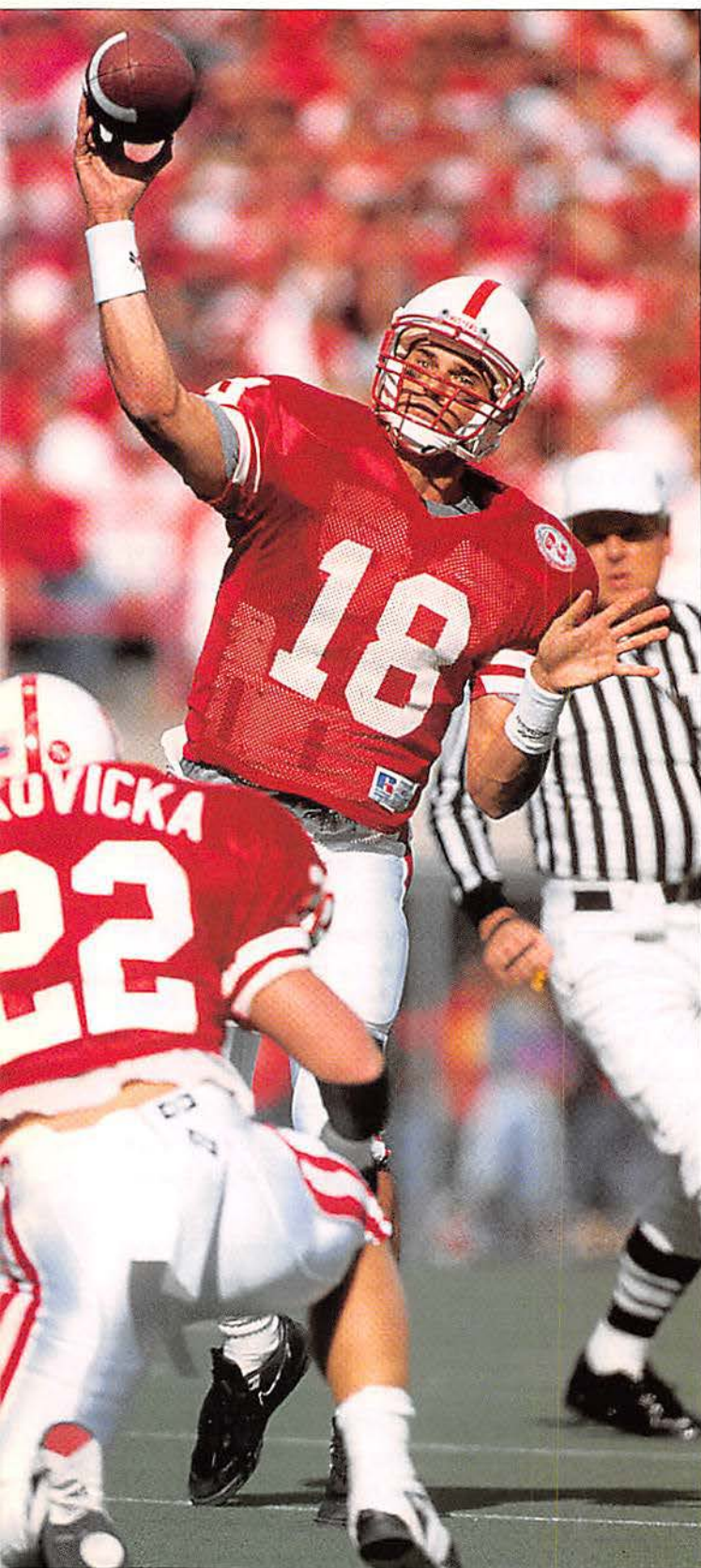
a field goal gone wide with one second left saved the championship for the Seminoles.

This season Nebraska seemed to have all the elements to push over the top, including Frazier, Lawrence Phillips and a superb offensive line keyed by Outland Trophy favorite Zach Wiegert. Then the injuries began. Lest anyone forget the long and painful chronology, we offer this brief review: In the second game the Huskers' best defensive back, Mike Minter, tore a knee ligament—out for the year. On Sept. 25 Frazier went out. The next week Frazier's backup, Brook Berringer, suffered the first partially collapsed lung; it was reinflated but sagged again the following week. Berringer returned, clad in a flak jacket, for parts of the following two games, but his fragility forced Osborne to shave the offense down to one dimension: Run between the tackles, forever. Then Berringer's backup, walk-on Matt Turman, injured his shoulder mopping up against Missouri. Behind Turman, the backups included a true freshman recovering from torn ligaments in his throwing hand, a wingback who had never played quarterback in college, a converted split end and a converted student manager. "Everybody had this feeling: What, are we cursed?" said Wiegert.

Colorado rolled into the biggest game of 1994 with no such worries. Aside from Salaam, whose punishing runs had powered him to the top of a slippery Heisman heap and prompted him to consider leaving school after the season for the NFL, Bill McCartney's unbeaten Buffs were the picture of stability. Colorado had the nation's second-rated offense, a knack for winning close games and an offense far more potent than Nebraska's. Stewart, who had buckled disastrously in the Buffaloes' 21-17 loss the previous year to the Cornhuskers, had earned back his teammates' confidence with defining wins at Michigan and Texas. He had thrown just three interceptions all season. "This year, when he's under the gun, he tries to take it in stride," said Colorado wide receiver Michael Westbrook before the game. "He has changed a whole lot."

Nebraska didn't buy it. Defensive coordinator Charlie McBride had a plan: Pressure Stewart until he broke. The Nebraska defensive line savaged Colorado, sacking Stewart three times. Salaam, the nation's leading rusher, finished with 134 yards, but Stewart completed just 12 of 28 passes for 150 yards; worse, in 15 attempts on third or fourth down, Colorado never converted. "We'd see him getting scared back there," said Husker defensive tackle Christian Peter, who with Terry Connealy sealed Stewart's fate with back-to-back fourth-down sacks in the third quarter. "We had to get in his face be-

Only one thing came between Westbrook (81) and a completed pass: Husker CB Tyrone Williams.



PETER READ MILLER

Unlike in previous weeks, Berringer came to pass, completing 12 of 17 for 142 yards and a TD.

cause we know if you shake Kordell up, he's going to choke."

Berringer was another story. Although Osborne wasn't sure how his quarterback would react, he knew there was no beating the Buffs with the offense Nebraska had run in previous weeks. "I ran him whenever necessary today—and I felt uneasy doing that—but we felt to win this game we'd have to," Osborne said. He needn't have worried. Berringer completed 12 of 17 passes for 142 yards, one touchdown and one interception, ran the option, perfectly flipped a shovel pass and, on a keeper, even disposed of Colorado linebacker Ted Johnson with one swipe of his arm. "I've always felt that, if given the chance, I'd prove what I can do," Berringer said after the game.

Zatechka merely let his T-shirt sum up his feelings and the theme of this Nebraska team. UNFINISHED BUSINESS the shirt read. Fact is, the Cornhuskers felt that they had beaten Florida State back in January. "It's like a being-on-a-mission thing," Zatechka said. "It seems like we've always got the deck stacked against us: Everybody says we're good but not good enough, that Colorado's going to beat us, that there's no way we can get through the season undefeated."

Long a bastion of bland, Nebraska had clearly gone about creating a prickly attitude for itself. The Cornhuskers got angry at an anonymous letter from Orlando that predicted Colorado would shut them out, and then, with nothing but rumors to go on, they decided that Stewart and Salaam had said that they were going to "have fun" with the Husker defense.

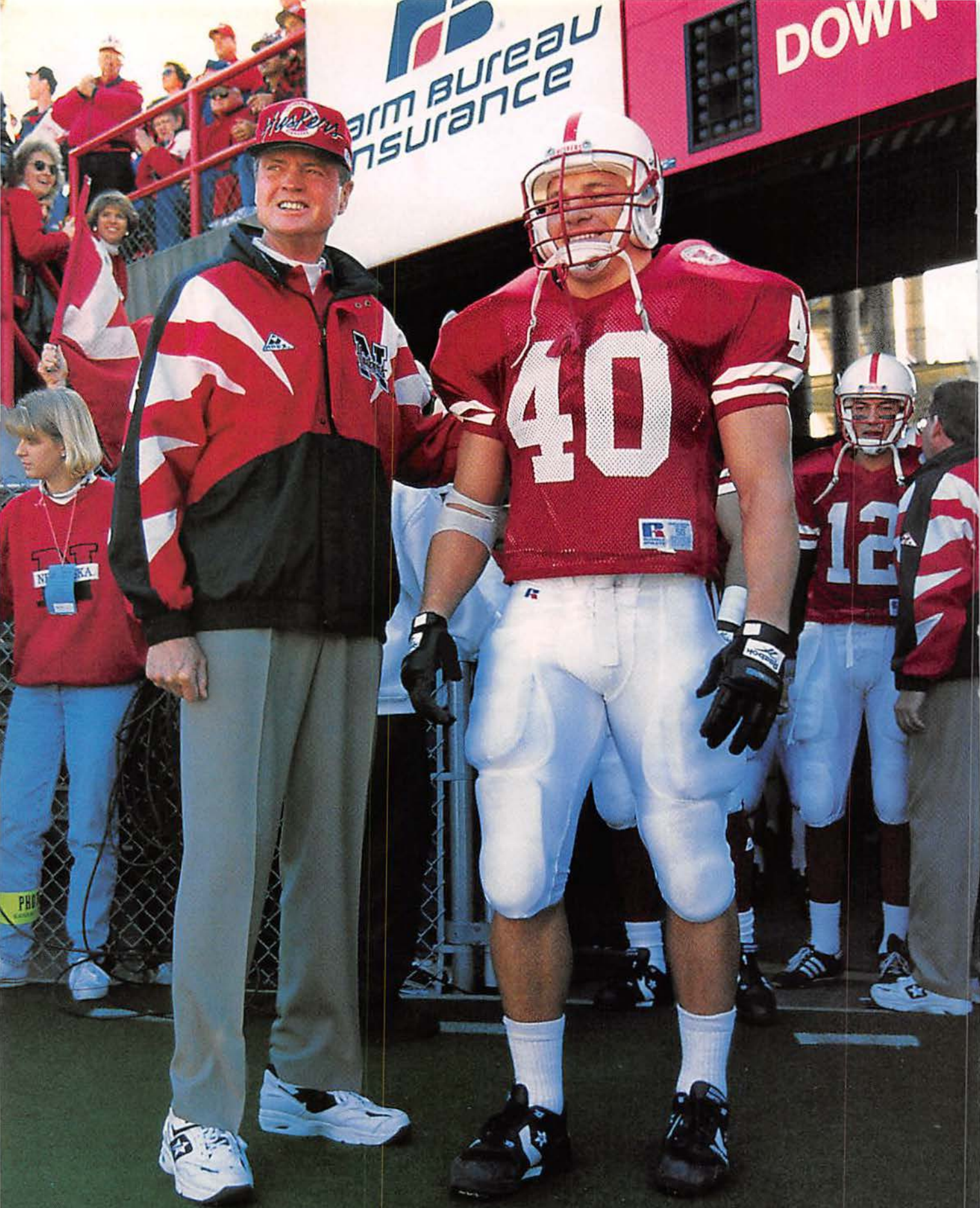
"Where do these people get off?" Wiegert said after the game. "They haven't beat us in four years, and they're saying they're going to play with us? Who are they kidding? And tell those guys from Missouri and Kansas State: They get their butts kicked, they shouldn't talk, either."

The only Cornhusker who seemed like himself was Osborne, who gave his usual vanilla answers in the postgame press conference and then went on TV and drawled his usual Gary Cooper refusal to campaign for poll votes. "I'd rather let you guys decide that," he said. After he walked off the set, though, Osborne happened by a television. His eyes got wide. "Is that Penn State 35-zip at the half?" he said. "That's tough. Now they'll probably vote them No. 1. Well, maybe the coaches'll vote us high. . . ."

What do you know? The Red was very much alive. And kicking. ■



TE Eric Alford had his team's number: The Huskers topped the AP poll after the victory.



A New Twist

In a surprising show of versatility, the Huskers downed Kansas by taking to the air

In the 104-year annals of Nebraska football, there was no footage, no radio replay, no photograph in any media guide of a moment quite like this one. In front of the 201st straight sellout at Memorial Stadium, tight end Eric Alford was running past the Kansas secondary, the ball arcing into his outstretched mitts, with nothing but unpopulated AstroTurf in front of him. With this 62-yard touchdown, Brook Berringer would go on to become the first Cornhusker ever to throw for more than 300 yards in a game. But alas, the spiral slipped through Alford's grasp, and neither the catch nor history was made.

Instead, Berringer connected on 13 of his 18 attempts for 267 yards, piloting Nebraska to a 45-17 win and directing the Big Red's biggest passing show since Dave Humm carved up Missouri for 267 yards back in 1972. Only a week before, Colorado coach Bill McCartney had been questioning Berringer's arm strength after the quarterback had completed only two passes to his wideouts. Following McCartney's cue, Kansas stacked up an eight-man defensive front designed to stymie the run and force Tom Osborne to go up top and way long.

So Osborne did, and Berringer delivered. "I'm done proving myself, so don't even ask," Berringer said. "We had to get the ball to the split ends, the receivers, to prove ourselves, so that's what we did."

Berringer threw five passes of at least 28 yards, two of which went for touchdowns, to split end Reggie Baul (51 yards) and wingback Clester Johnson (64). "If we can get past our defensive backs in practice sometimes—and I think they're the best

FB Cory Schlesinger and the rest of Osborne's seniors made their last home game a good one.



in the nation—then we can do it to anybody," Johnson said.

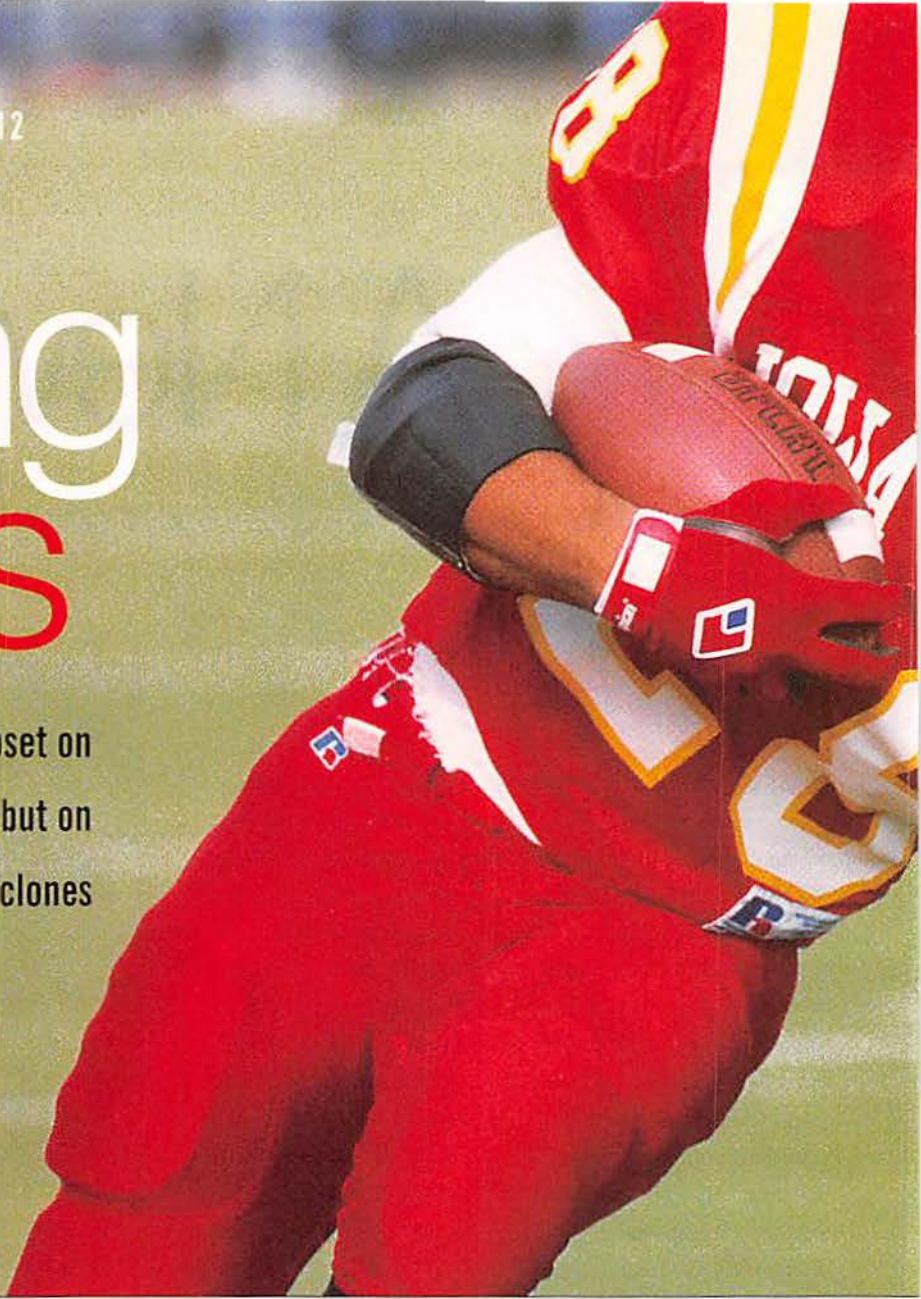
"What's nice about it is it shows everyone that we can pitch it from a variety of angles," receivers coach Ron Brown said. "We have skilled people as runners and as receivers, and from what I've seen, we've dominated people with blocking." Indeed, the Jayhawks' two sacks doubled the season total permitted by the Nebraska line.

With the Huskers up 38-10 at halftime, Osborne turned to a more familiar source of yardage. Lawrence Phillips pounded for 118 of his 153 yards in the third quarter to lift his season total to 1,489. That shattered Bobby Reynolds's 44-year-old school record for rushing by a sophomore, 1,342. "Hey, who would guess?" Phillips said. "This is Nebraska, and the passing opened up the running."

The showing convinced the coaches who vote in the CNN/USA Today poll: The Huskers had trailed Penn State in that poll but moved to No. 1 after their rout of Kansas and the Nittany Lions' unimpressive 35-29 win over Indiana. —H.H.

Taking Ames

The Cornhuskers had been upset on their previous visit to Iowa State, but on this day they survived the Cyclones



It seems unlikely that top-ranked Nebraska's most harrowing road game of the season would come against an 0-8-1 team that was a 34-point underdog. Unless you consider the site. On their last visit to Ames, Iowa, in 1992, the once-beaten Cornhuskers had suffered one of the season's biggest upsets, 19-10. This time, Jim Walden was making his final appearance after an eight-year stint as Iowa State's coach, and the game was being played before a cranked-up crowd of 45,186 at Cyclone Stadium. "We knew from the get-go they were going to play hard," Husker quarterback Brook Berringer said. "It was their last home game, Senior Day, the coach's last game, not to mention the 16 Nebraska guys on their roster."

The state's most vengeful exports must have been on the Cyclone defense, which entered the game ranked 105th in stopping the run; only two teams in Division I-A were more porous. But in the first half Iowa State limited Lawrence Phillips to 30 yards on 15 carries. The Cornhuskers' lead was 7-6 with three minutes left in the half, but two minutes later senior wingback Abdul Muhammad's diving, fingertip grab in the end zone gave Nebraska an eight-point cushion. Iowa State answered that 38-yard scoring pass with a 58-yarder from Todd Doxzon to Calvin Branch to make it 14-12 with 3:42 left in the third quarter.

"Two points," Doxzon said, "and we had confidence."

Said Berringer, "It was hard not to keep thinking of the 1992 game."

Early in the fourth quarter, the Huskers took over on the Cyclone 41. "I knew something would happen on that drive be-



cause the offensive line was fired up, socking each other around on the sidelines," Berringer said. Four plays later, I-back Damon Benning ran in from the six to make it 21-12.

Once again, Iowa State countered—or seemed to. Doxzon led a march that started at his own 20 and ended with a sideline screen to Geoff Turner, who shredded two tackles and broke another. But the 32-yard touchdown was nullified by a holding penalty. "We didn't have the gas to hold up much after that," Doxzon said. The Huskers would score once more, on a 21-yard dash by Phillips, to finish off a 28-12 victory.

Like the rest of the Huskers, Phillips didn't really find his footing until late in the game—but he had good reason. Phillips started the game wearing shoes with nubby cleats, designed to give better traction on wet turf. But it never rained, so Phillips borrowed a pair of short-cleated shoes from junior guard

Nebraska cornerback Eric Stokes (16) put a heads-up hit on Cyclone running back Troy Davis.

Bryan Pruitt early in the fourth quarter. In his new footgear Phillips high-stepped for 120 of his 183 yards, which raised his season total to 1,672. That broke the Big Eight sophomore rushing record of 1,553 set by Thurman Thomas of Oklahoma State in 1985 and meant that only one Husker in history—Mike Rozier, twice—had amassed more yardage in a season.

Still, the Huskers rushed for only 285 yards, 80 below their nation-leading average. But Coach Osborne was happy. "If you guys are voting [in the polls]," he said, "think Red. This was a tough situation, and there was nothing I could do about it." Nebraska left with a reason to celebrate: The Huskers clinched at least a share of their fourth straight conference title. —H.H.

12 Down, One to Go

A hard-fought victory in Norman put the Cornhuskers on the verge of achieving their dream



The appearance of the ceremonial orange should have triggered a jubilant celebration at the end of a triumphant afternoon at Owen Field. The No. 1-ranked Cornhuskers had just whipped Oklahoma 13-3 before a crowd of 70,216 to clinch their fourth straight Big Eight title and their second straight shot at the national championship. Ed Williamson, the Orange Bowl Committee president, was in the Nebraska locker room, presenting coach Tom Osborne with a bid to his bash in Miami. "I guess they want to take a photo of you with the orange," Williamson said.

But Osborne did not seem thrilled with the proposition of being flash-blinded while holding an orange—no matter how symbolically sweet it was. "Yeah," he said. "Whatever."

Despite having raised their record to 12-0, the Huskers were in no mood to revel. "It's not time to cut loose yet," linebacker Troy Dumas said. "All the work we've been doing has been toward one game—the national championship." And after seven straight bowl losses, Nebraska could hardly rest easy while awaiting Jan. 2 and a likely rendezvous with Miami.

The Huskers' nerves had also been jangled by this game, the swan song of Oklahoma coach Gary Gibbs. The archrival Sooners played hard for Gibbs, whose resignation had been announced four days before the kickoff in Norman. The interior of the Sooner defense thwarted the nation-leading Nebraska ground game, holding Lawrence Phillips to double-digit yardage (50, on 21 carries) for the first time all fall. "In light of [Gibbs's quitting], I predicted Oklahoma would play very well," Osborne said. "I do not believe we missed on our prediction."

But the Husker players came into the game with far less tentative forecasts. "We figured if we scored three points—O.K., six points—it would be enough to win with the way we've been playing defense," linebacker Ed Stewart said.

After surrendering 132 yards in the first half, which ended in a 3-3 tie, Nebraska yielded a mere 47 yards in the final two quarters, including minus five in the fourth. Oklahoma quarterback Garrick McGee did not complete a pass in that last period, thanks largely to senior cornerback Barron Miles, who ran his school record of passes broken up in a season to 11 and his conference-leading interception total to five. Miles had earlier blocked his fourth kick of the season, snuffing out a 33-yard field goal attempt with 8:58 to play before halftime.

Still, the Nebraska attack, third in the land in scoring (38.4

As usual, the rival Sooners were sky high for the showdown, but Eric Alford and his mates held on.





points a game), was struggling. After Darin Erstad kicked a 46-yard field goal at the start of the second quarter, the Huskers went almost 20 minutes without a first down. Brook Berringer completed only four of 11 passes for 23 yards in the first half and was sacked three times. More than once, Osborne turned and glanced at the familiar face of Tommie Frazier, who was on the sideline, wearing the unfamiliar number 17.

No one had expected Frazier to be back in uniform in '94, least of all the equipment manager, who had not cleaned his number 15 jersey. But blood thinners had helped dissolve the clots that sidelined Frazier, and he was ready to at least stand by. "We told the doctor we wouldn't put Tommie in unless Brook went down or something really catastrophic happened," Osborne said. "But it was nice insurance to have him on the sidelines." (Also, though Osborne had applied for a medical

redshirt for the quarterback in hopes of giving Frazier an additional year of eligibility, the NCAA denied the request.)

Berringer, meanwhile, refused to look over his shoulder at Frazier. "When I heard he was able to play, I just put it out of my mind," he said. Osborne stood by his starter, and with Nebraska facing a third-and-three on its own 22 in the third quarter, his faith paid off. Berringer bootlegged for 28 yards and set up a 26-yard Tom Sieler field goal that put the Big Red up for good. "That one play was the biggest of the ball game," Gibbs said. "We had gained field position with our opening drive and then lost it with that one play."

At the start of the fourth quarter, Berringer struck again, on another third-down call. Catching Oklahoma in man-to-man coverage, he connected with wingback Abdul Muhammad on a 44-yard heave. "I don't feel like I *have* to be the big-play guy,"



Muhammad (27) was the big-play man of the day, leaving Big Red fans grinning from ear to ear.

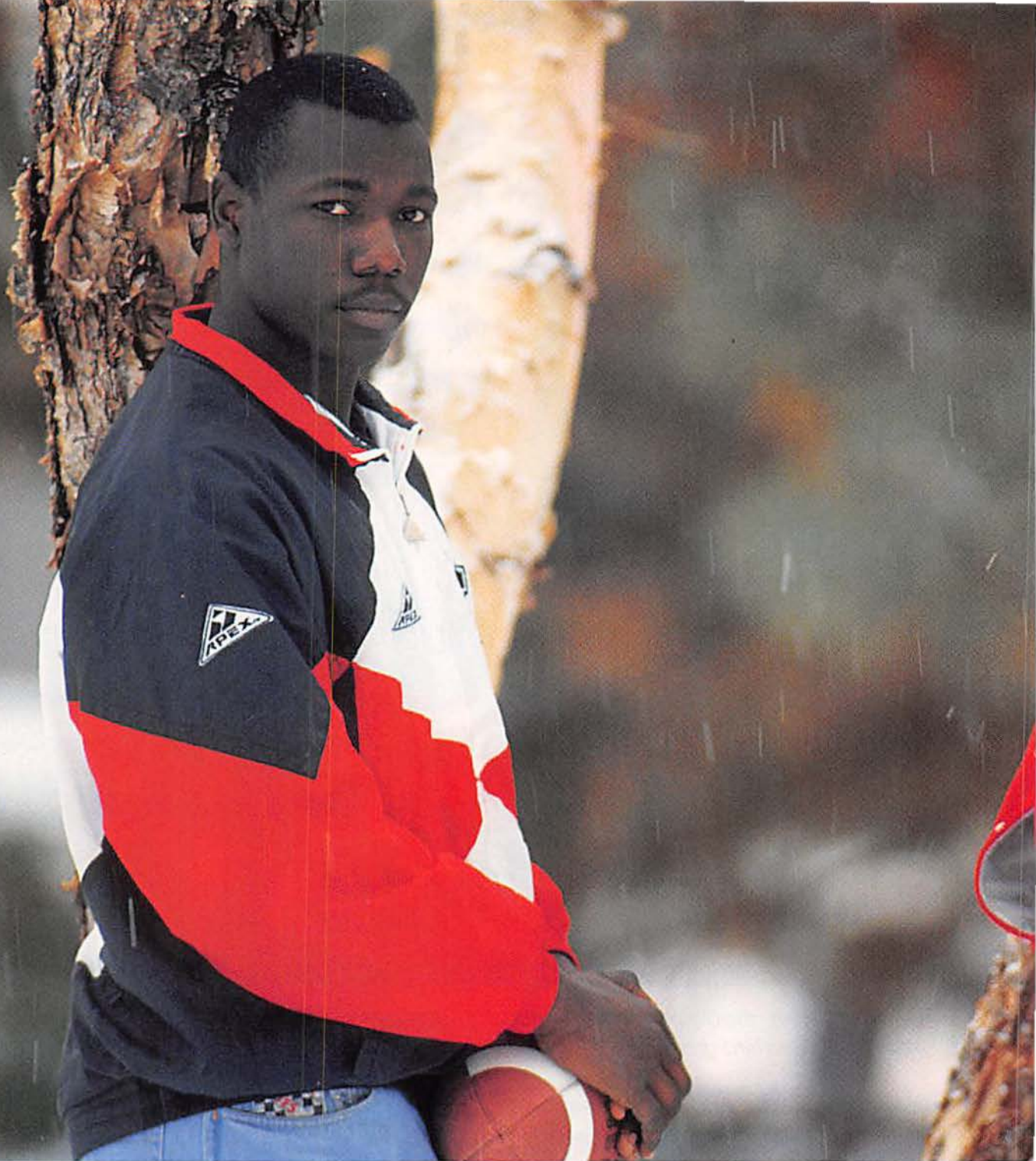
Muhammad said, "but I *like* to be." Three snaps later, Berringer snuck over from the one-yard line for the game's only touchdown.

Though Phillips never did spring free, he finished the season with 1,722 yards rushing, second in Nebraska history to Mike Rozier's 1983 total of 2,148. But the day belonged to Berringer (13 completions in 23 attempts for 166 yards) and the Husker D. "We played a tough team in a physical game under tough circumstances, and we won it," Stewart said. "We came so close a year ago. We haven't forgotten that. Not everybody gets a second chance, and now we've got one. We have a chance to go back again and do it right."

—H.H.



PHIL HUBER



Even as the controls shifted from Frazier (left) to Berringer, the machine ran smoothly.

At the end of August, when Nebraska drilled West Virginia in the Kickoff Classic, the Cornhuskers' quarterback was a slippery, 6' 2", 205-pound option specialist improving as a passer each day, inspiring his teammates with his leadership and standing at the forefront of the Heisman Trophy race. He was the one player Nebraska *could not afford to lose*.

At the end of November, when Nebraska had completed a 12-0 regular season and put itself

in position to win the national championship, its quarterback was a 6' 4", 210-pound statue with a strong arm, straight-ahead speed and minimal quickness. He would receive nary a vote in the balloting for the Heisman Trophy.

The season's starter was Tommie Frazier, the finisher was Brook Berringer—until Frazier returned to start in the Orange Bowl and rally the Huskers to victory. Together they are an advertisement for the



Tommie Frazier and Brook Berringer

Nebraska system, into which athletes of varying types can be plugged while the machine chugs along smoothly. "I don't think you could find one school that lost its starting quarterback and still is undefeated this late into the season," Frazier said in late October.

The unexpected torch-passing took place when Frazier was sidelined with a blood clot in his right leg on Sept. 25. It was a jarring blow to Frazier, who had dedicated himself to piloting Nebraska's run to the

rushing touchdowns: "I'll know more when I look at the films." As Tom Shatel of the *Omaha World-Herald* wrote, "Babbling Brook, he's not."

But after the Wyoming victory, a narrow escape that made the Huskers believe they could win without Frazier, offensive tackle Rob Zatechka said, "Brook is right up there in showing that he's not flustered."

That's often said about Frazier, a player Nebraska could not afford to lose after all. —TIM LAYDEN

national title and also to lifting the spirits of his 29-year-old brother, Melvin, who is serving a nine-year drug sentence in a Florida prison.

"He called me after the West Virginia game," said Tommie. "None of the inmates believed I was his brother." Said Melvin, "Tommie sent some pictures. Then they all believed me."

However, the discovery of the blood clot altered Tommie's perspective on his role as an athlete. "This wasn't just my football career," he said. "It could have been my life."

As for Berringer, he did what was required: He kept the Mercedes on the road and, at times, drove it skillfully. Berringer completed 62% of his passes for 1,295 yards and 10 touchdowns, with just five interceptions.

In an unexpected way Berringer showed he was remarkably similar to the man he replaced: Both have an affinity for silence. Frazier has never been one to wax poetic about his own deeds; he summarized the Heisman race by saying, "You talk about that and people are just going to think you're out there doing what's best for you." After the Huskers' win over Wyoming, Berringer had this to say of his effort, which included three

Nebraska People

When not crashing into opposing players this season, linebacker Ed Stewart spent his time playing video games with small children. It wasn't all play, though: Stewart, a senior who last August earned a degree in psychology at Nebraska, was conducting research on the ability of children to adjust to delayed gratification. In the experiment, five-year-olds were given the option of either playing with a video game immediately for 30 seconds or waiting a few minutes to get two minutes of game time. Initially, the children usually opted for playing right away—a response that Stewart understands.

"There have been studies that show that children who grasp the concept of self-control at an early age generally tend to be more successful as they get older," Stewart says. "I believe in delayed gratification. I've had to learn it, too."

As a freshman, Stewart was a test case for coach Tom Osborne and defensive coordinator Charlie McBride, who were revamping the Nebraska defense after the Cornhuskers were dominated defensively in a 23–3 loss to Miami in the 1989 Orange Bowl. Osborne and his staff began recruiting quicker players—like Stewart, who runs the 40 in 4.73 seconds—and converting them to linebackers. "I was recruited as a safety and weighed only 195 pounds," says Stewart, who was a safety and a

running back at Mount Carmel High in Chicago, where his team won back-to-back state championships. "I wanted to play safety, but I was redshirted. I didn't like the switch at first."

But in time the strategy proved successful. Stewart gained 25 pounds and played in 10 games the next

Ed Stewart

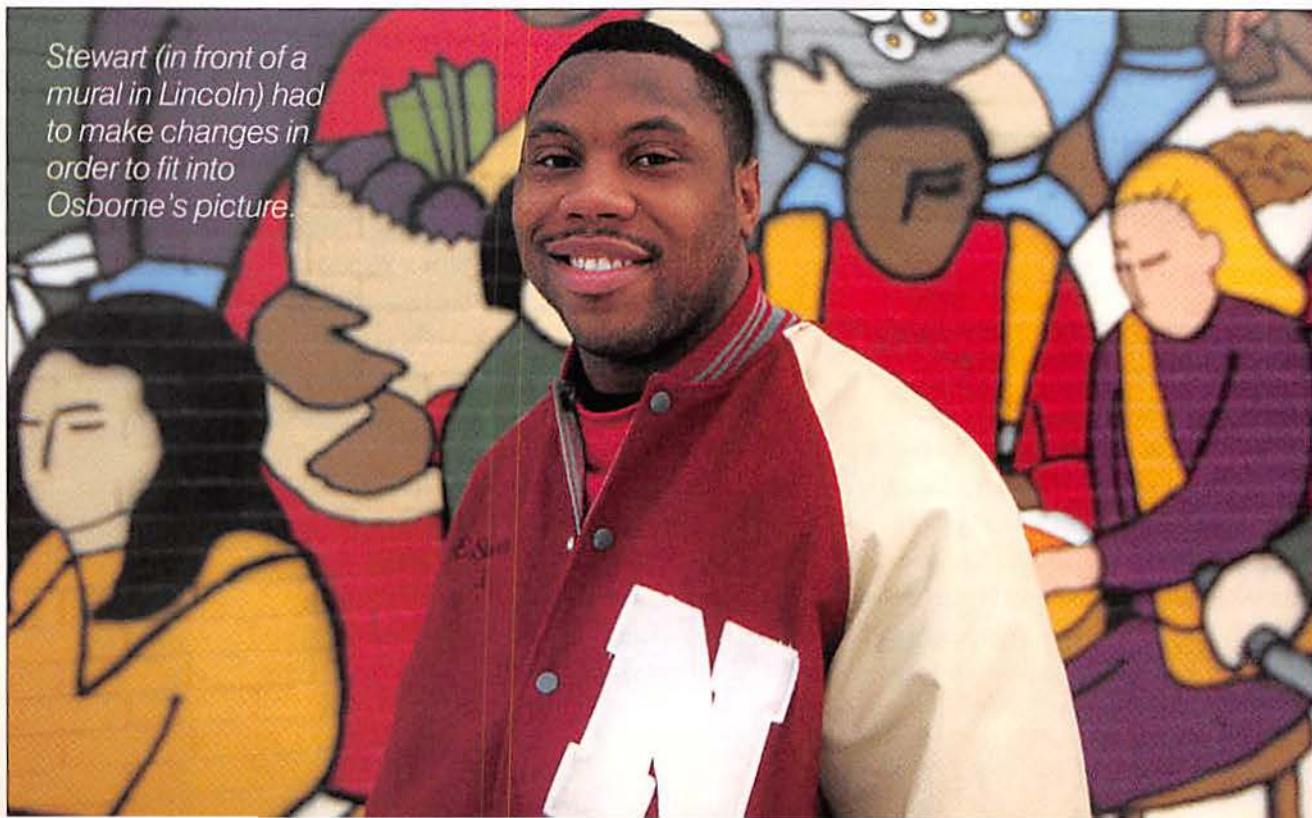
year—he had 11 tackles in the Cornhuskers' 1991 Orange Bowl loss to Miami—and has started in 37 consecutive games since. This season he led the team with 96 tackles, including 41 solos and 18 quarterback hurries, and was a finalist for the Butkus Award behind Dana Howard of Illinois. He ranks fifth on Nebraska's list of alltime leading tacklers, with 257, three more than 1993 Butkus winner Trev Alberts, now with the Indianapolis Colts.

Needless to say, the Husker coaches have been pleased with the results of their experiment. "Ed blitzes so hard that he peels the skin off his eyeballs," says McBride.

Now, with the national title in hand, Stewart can return this spring to continue his work in child psychology, then pursue his Ph.D. "At some point I'd like to get that *doctor* in front of my name," Stewart says. His own on-the-field experiment is over, and he says, "I guess it was all worth it." Ed Stewart doesn't have to delay his gratification any longer.

—ASHLEY MCGEACHY

Stewart (in front of a mural in Lincoln) had to make changes in order to fit into Osborne's picture.



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Responsibility fell on Lawrence Phillips like snow in Lincoln, first gently and then in a blizzard. Twice as a true freshman in '93 he had come off the bench to rescue Nebraska's running game, pounding UCLA for 137 yards on 28 carries, then getting 64 yards on 13 carries in the Cornhuskers' narrow Orange Bowl loss to Florida State. But in '94, as a sophomore I-back, Phillips was asked to assume the top position on the depth chart.

The burden would quickly grow heavier. Four games into the fall, Tommie Frazier was sidelined. More carries

for Phillips. In the fifth game, Brook Berringer suffered a partially collapsed lung, after which Tom Osborne decided to limit the quarterback's exposure to contact by running fewer option plays. *More* carries for Phillips.

And as Nebraska swept through the season, Phillips rushed for 1,722 yards, gaining more than 100 yards in each of the first 11 games. Responsibility fulfilled.

It was nothing new for Phillips. At age 12 he was living in Inglewood, Calif., with his mother, Juanita, and his younger brother, Sean. When his mother's boyfriend moved in, Lawrence moved out. "I didn't like the guy,"

Phillips says. He stayed with a friend until child-welfare authorities placed him in a group home in West Covina, where he lived for six years. "Lawrence has been on his own for a long time," says Osborne. "He's a tough kid."

That toughness has served Phillips well as an athlete but not always so well off the field. He was, for example, the scourge of the group home. "The other boys feared him like the plague," says Tina McElhannon, who ran the

home. "He was very quick to knock people out, literally."

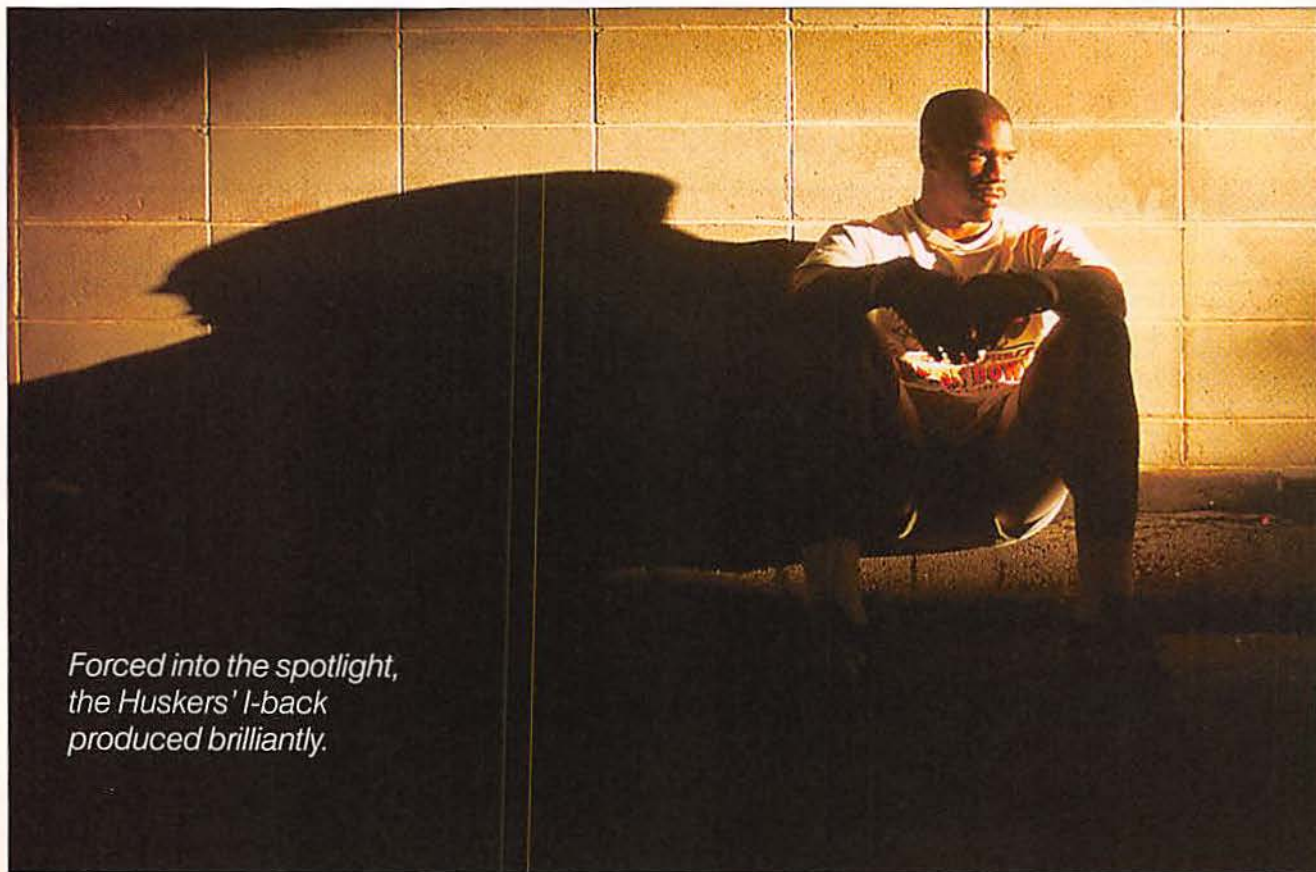
Phillips eventually adapted and, looking back, he says, "The best

thing was that they got me into sports."

He was a star running back at Baldwin Park High and chose Nebraska over USC. Still a tough guy, he was suspended once (for fighting) and benched once (for missing practice) as a freshman; in '94, though, he was a model citizen and the foundation of the offense.

"If Lawrence can keep everything moving in the right direction, on and off the field, he has a chance to be one of the better players we've ever had," says Osborne. If this year was any indication, the key seems to be this: Increase the responsibility, and he will carry the load. —T.L.

Lawrence Phillips



Forced into the spotlight, the Huskers' I-back produced brilliantly.

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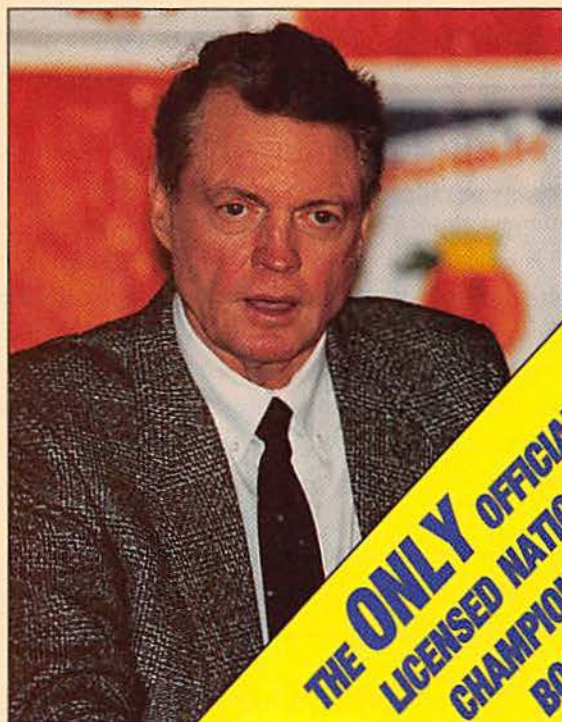
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By chewing up defenses, Nebraska's offensive linemen have taken on a glamour all their own

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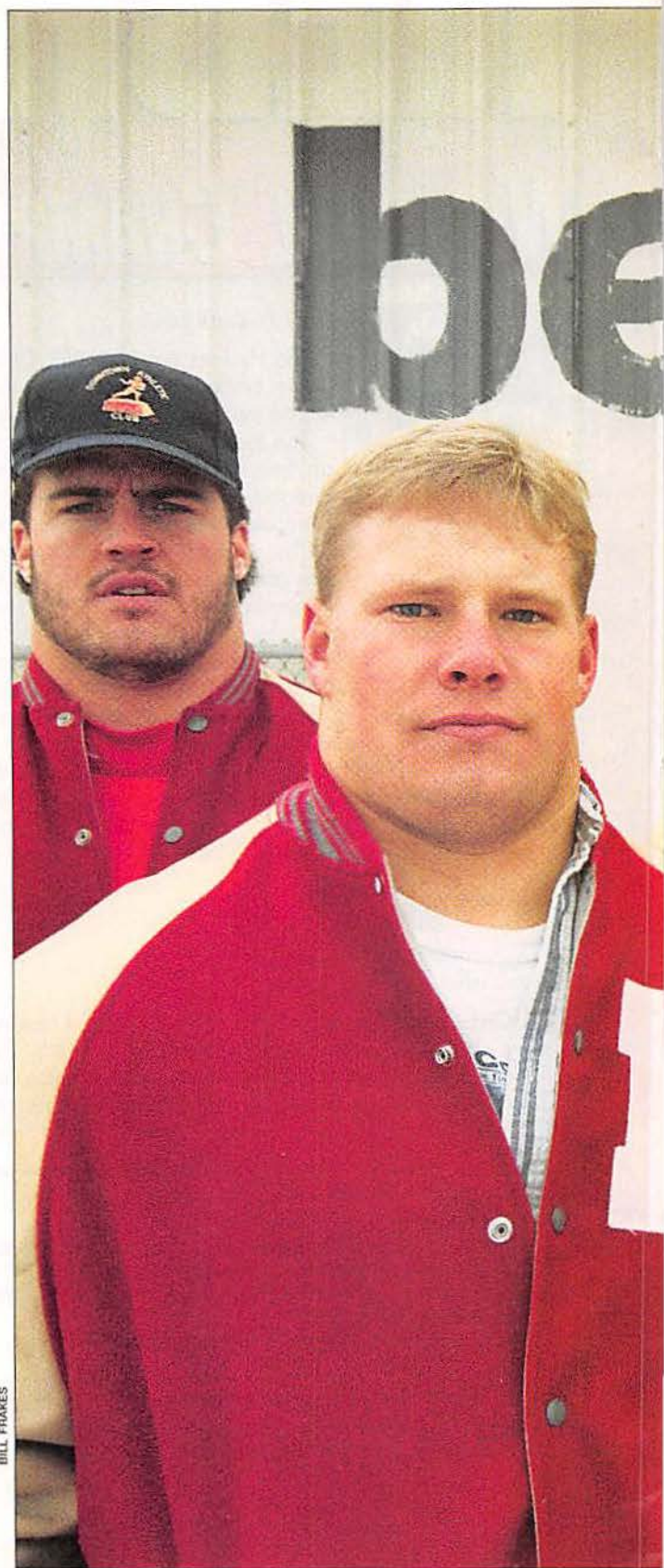
They roll through the doors like two trucks rearing on their hind wheels, side by side, cinder block heads swiveling, eyes blank. People make room. Who is bigger than Zach Wiegert and Rob Zatechka, anywhere? Not many men consume so much space: 6' 5" and at least 300 pounds apiece, giants in this land of cartoon characters, gliding easily into a Disney World hotel in Orlando. Mouths drop. Mom and Pop and Junior and Sis, even jaded by a day's worth of Mickey Mouse and Epcot, stop and whisper "Oh, my" as the men move into view.

No one here can quite place them, nor is there reason that anyone should. It's the night of the big college football awards show: Penn State's Ki-Jana Carter is in the lobby, Heisman Trophy winner Rashaan Salaam just blew through, the ESPN boys lurk—famous faces colliding. The two big guys? No one asks for autographs. "We're Nebraska," Wiegert says with a smirk. "We're supposed to be losers."

This was three weeks before the Orange Bowl, where the No. 1-ranked Cornhuskers would take on No. 3 Miami, and this was a fact: Nebraska stood on the verge of a national title, and

The front five—(from left) Stai, Wilks, Zatechka, Wiegert and Graham—are big men on campus.

BILL FRANKS



eeef barm





offensive tackles Wiegert and Zatechka constituted a very big reason why. In a season of bizarre injury and national scorn for the Huskers, the offensive line—Outland Trophy winner Wiegert, the brainy Zatechka, center Aaron Graham, All-America guard Brenden Stai and former walk-on guard Joel Wilks—had carried them to a 12-0 record in the regular season and the inside track to a championship Nebraska last won in 1971.

So back in Lincoln, anyway, these guys were celebrities. More than any other line in memory, this one has been the object of fans' affection. All season Memorial Stadium was a

place where—even as running back Lawrence Phillips rushed for 1,722 yards and backup quarterback Brook Berringer piloted the offense supremely—you heard fans saying, "Now watch how Zach pulls on this play." Linemen? Usually they're lucky if the quarterback buys them steaks. Not in Lincoln; not this year. "I don't think people give Brook, Lawrence and [fullback] Cory Schlesinger and our wide receivers the credit they deserve," Zatechka says straight-faced, prompting Wiegert to nearly spit up his sandwich.

"That's a first, isn't it?" Wiegert says.



PHIL HUBER

Berringer had time on his side, because Zatechka, Wilks and Graham (from left) were, too.

And every week, they got it. On Oct. 29 Nebraska mowed through No. 2 Colorado like it was wheat waiting to be cut. "They found a way to make us look like idiots," said Colorado defensive tackle Darius Holland after Nebraska's 24-7 win in Lincoln. "They are a great offensive line. They came off the ball, and they didn't position-block us—they blew us off the ball. They did at will whatever they wanted to."

"Look at you," Wiegert says. "You've got some big arms."

"I do have some arms, don't I?" Zatechka says.

This is how their conversations go, typical undergrad blabber—until you realize it is more self-mockery than anything else and that the blatantly insincere compliments usually flow one way. This is because Wiegert, a sure first-round pick in the NFL draft, a 300-pound man who can dunk a basketball with two hands or drain three-pointers if you'd like, can do with ease what no amount of lifting or running or watching film can ever teach Zatechka. Wiegert is a natural.

Zatechka is a natural too, but a different kind: He graduated last May with a 4.0 grade point average in biological sciences and is applying to medical school. He rarely studied outside class; he attributes his high grades to the fact that he found a field he liked. Just for the heck of it, he studied endocrinology this semester. This fall Zatechka withdrew his much-publicized application for a Rhodes scholarship.

"You would've gotten it," Wiegert says. "Four-point-oh and playing football?"

"Hell, yeah, I'm so damn smart," says Zatechka, except no amount of false cockiness can hide the fact that it's true. He decided against applying for a Rhodes not only because he wants to marry his girlfriend, Jennifer Putensen, and the Rhodes doesn't accept married candidates, but also mostly because the Rhodes won't let anyone defer the scholarship a year or two. And Zatechka is more immediately intrigued by the next level of brawn rather than brains.

"I'm not some stellar candidate for pro football,..." Zatechka says.

"You're there," Wiegert says, thumbing through a menu. "You're in the zone, baby."

"... but I've got some chance for someone to pick me, maybe a late-rounder, maybe a free agent, something like that."

Give Zatechka the choice between acing a test and laying

It is. No other offensive line in college football history has so overshadowed—figuratively, anyway—such a successful backfield, and rightfully so. The Cornhuskers started three different quarterbacks this season, and it never mattered which one was taking the snaps. The team still led the nation in rushing with 340 yards per game, still blew open holes when everyone knew it had no choice but to run. "If it's fourth-and-91, we'll go for it," Graham muttered in the huddle during the 17-6 win over then No. 16 Kansas State on Oct. 15. "Big deal. We'll get it."

The Offensive Line

out a perfect block, and it is no contest. "Football," he says, "because for me that's come harder. If I put the same amount of effort [into football] that I put into school, I'd be riding the bench right now. I put a ton of effort into football. I'm a good player, but I'm not a great football player. I'm going to blow smoke up Zach's butt: Zach's a great player. Brenden Stai's a great player. I'm not on their level. My feet aren't that quick. I don't have the instinct to run downfield and, *boom*, turn and whack some guy when I should."

Wiegert knows when to whack. Zatechka struggled in the final game of the season, against Oklahoma, and the left side of the line gave up two sacks (the entire line surrendered just six sacks all season). Ask Wiegert how many sacks he has given up in four years and he laughs. "I haven't given up a sack—*ever*," he says. "Well, there was one last year, but the quarterback just ran into my guy."

"I have no lateral movement," Zatechka says.

"I run as fast sideways and backwards as I can forward," Wiegert says. "I don't lose a step with pads on, either."

Wiegert says he has never been more focused on football than this season. He started the year in his best shape, and "I don't do stupid things like I used to." The dumbest of those came in 1992, when Wiegert got into a brawl. "I beat up the Nebraska baseball team," he says. "Me and two other guys."

Wiegert had been home with friends, watching a video of wrestler Rowdy Roddy Piper, when a few of his teammates

showed up torn and bruised. "The [baseball players] beat up some football players at a party," Wiegert says. "So we kind of went over to their house and showed them what was up. It wasn't a very smart thing to do. I wouldn't do it again."

In past seasons Nebraska has had great individual blockers in center Dave Rimington (a first-round NFL draft pick in '83) and guard Dean Steinkuhler ('84), but Tom Osborne and line coach Milt Tenopir agree that this is the most balanced line they've ever coached. And they've needed it: After replacing Tommie Frazier, Berringer suffered a partially collapsed lung in his first start; the lung sagged again the following week, against Oklahoma State, leaving the Cornhuskers with walk-on Matt Turman and an unlikely collection of potential backups. At halftime of the Cowboy game, Osborne gathered the linemen, told them there would be little passing, just running plays up the middle—again and again and again. "Everybody on the line just looked at one another and said, 'It's on you,'" Zatechka recalls. "There was an understanding that the offense lived and died with what we did."

"What else could you want?" Wiegert says. "That's like a dream for a lineman."

Stai (on the bench, below) is urged on by his mates, who thrive on muscle mismatches, such as Zatechka (right) on Kansas DE Harold Harris.



BILL FRANKS (LEFT), AL TELEMANS



Nebraska scored 23 points in the second half and won 32-3. The next week, against Kansas State, Turman started and a still-ailing Berringer finished. The offense was monochromatic—the classic three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust attack that Osborne has so often been criticized for running—but it worked. “The best thing” says fullback Schlesinger, “is standing behind them in the huddle, thinking, These guys are in front of me.”

Osborne didn't want this Orange Bowl game. His teams had been to the Orange Bowl four times since his 1983 team lost to the Hurricanes 31-30, and each bowl day had left him a whipping boy; Miami romped twice, in '89 and '92, then Florida State beat the Cornhuskers the past two years, including an 18-16 squeaker to win its first national championship last January. Osborne had a point when he said Miami and Florida State have a home field advantage in the Orange Bowl. But his complaining made it seem as if Nebraska could be intimidated—

seven straight bowl losses in all didn't help—and his comment on Dec. 12 about being “scared” of possibly unruly Hurricane fans only strengthened that perception. But luckily for Osborne, his players didn't want to hear it. They knew there was no better way to end 11 years of frustration than by beating the most tormenting opponent of all.

“We were all rooting for Miami [to get to the Orange Bowl],” Wiegert said a few weeks before the showdown. “They say, ‘You can't beat Miami in Miami, you can't beat any Florida team playing in the Orange Bowl, you can't win a bowl game, period.’ This team has been together and had a goal of winning a national championship since we've been here [Wiegert played as a freshman on the '91 Nebraska team that was beaten in the Orange Bowl 22-0 by the Hurricanes], and every year we've gotten closer and closer. The only way for us to be national champs and deserve it is to beat Miami in Miami. I wouldn't have it any other way.” ■

Sour Oranges

For four Husker teams, New Year's in Miami has meant misery | BY CHRISTIAN STONE

The losses are best measured not in points, but in feet and inches. Ten more feet to the right on Byron Bennett's 45-yard field goal attempt as time expired on New Year's Day in 1994 and Tom Osborne would have shed his image as "Ahab in search of Moby Dick," as he put it. Six fewer inches to the left on Turner Gill's two-point conversion fling to Jeff Smith in 1984 and Gill would never have had to stand in the north end zone of the Orange Bowl explaining to the gaggle of reporters how the national title had slipped away again.

Before Jan. 1, 1995, Nebraska football history was pocked with near misses. Four times in the last 30 seasons, three times in the last 15, a Nebraska win in the Orange Bowl would have assured the school a national title. Each time, the Huskers walked off on the short end of a close call—even though they kept it interesting until last call, losing the four games by an average of five points. A review of the blotter:

JAN. 1, 1966

ALABAMA 39, NEBRASKA 28

New Year's Day disappointment did not begin with Osborne. Ranked third at the end of the regular season, the Bob Devaney-coached Huskers suddenly found themselves in position to win the national crown when No. 2 Arkansas lost to LSU in the Cotton Bowl that afternoon and top-ranked Michigan State fell to UCLA in the Rose Bowl minutes before the start of the Orange Bowl.

With the cosmos aligned just so, Nebraska went out and played its worst half of the season against the No. 4-ranked Crimson Tide, which entered the game with a loss and a tie. Behind the passing of Steve Sloan, the Joe Namath heir who had

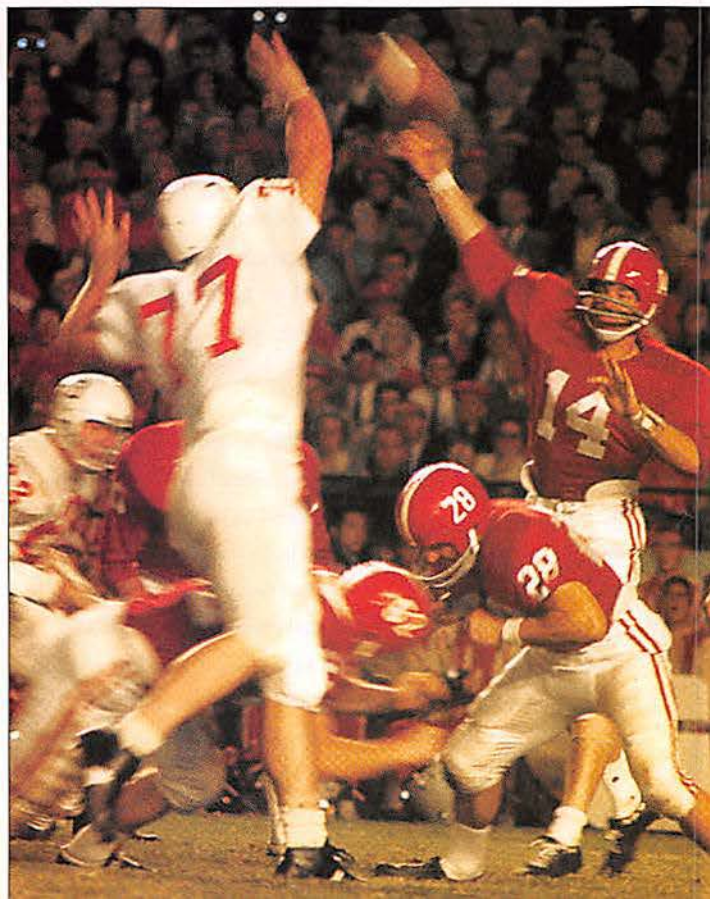
been proclaimed by 'Bama coach Bear Bryant as the most accurate quarterback in school history, the Tide rolled to a 24-7 halftime lead. Sloan would finish the game with 20 completions in 29 attempts for 296 yards and two touchdowns.

Five years later, Nebraska would win the first of back-to-back national titles, easing the pain of this near miss in the memory of the faithful. More egregious would be the three to follow.

JAN. 1, 1982

CLEMSON 22, NEBRASKA 15

Only a season of nationwide mediocrity had conspired to land the Cornhuskers in position to win the national championship





The slings of Sloan (14, left) and Bennett's errant kick (above) brought '65 and '93 to sad ends.

when they faced the Tigers. After starting the season with losses in two of its first three games, Nebraska rebounded to win its last eight regular-season games and jump to a No. 4 ranking. And as they sat in their Miami hotel rooms preparing to face No. 1-ranked Clemson on New Year's night, the Cornhuskers watched No. 3 Alabama fall to Texas in the Cotton Bowl. When Pitt defeated second-ranked Georgia in the Sugar Bowl that evening, the national title race became, as it had 16 years before, a two-horse affair between the Orange Bowl participants.

Not that Clemson coach Danny Ford saw it that way. Said Ford: "From what I had been hearing and reading, I figured there were more ways for us to prove we didn't belong on the same field with Nebraska than to prove that they didn't belong on the field with us."

It was a piece of one-downsmanship that proved to be wholly

unfounded. By the start of the fourth quarter, Clemson held a commanding 22-7 lead. It was at that point that the Georgia loss flashed onto the Orange Bowl scoreboard. With a renewed sense of urgency, Nebraska put together a 69-yard drive that was capped by Roger Craig's 26-yard run around left end. Craig again ran it in around left end for the two-point conversion to bring Nebraska within a touchdown. But the Cornhuskers would get only two more chances to score, a three-and-out series midway through the quarter and one Hail Mary as time expired.

JAN. 2, 1984

MIAMI 31, NEBRASKA 30

The Huskers marched into Miami a team that had won 22 consecutive games and gone down to the wire in the national championship hunt in each of the previous two seasons. As such, they seemed poised to claim the mantle as college football's Team of the '80s. Compared with the stereotype of the Huskers as a group of corn-fed behemoths, this Osborne team

The Near Misses

was a relative high-wire act. The offensive backfield boasted Mike Rozier, who three weeks earlier had won the Heisman Trophy; Irving Fryar, who three months later would be the first pick in the NFL draft; and Gill, the catalyst of an offense that had averaged 52 points and 546.7 yards a game during the regular season.

And who would have expected Miami to become the team of the decade? It had been only five years since coach Howard Schnellenberger began reviving a program that had known but two winning seasons in the 10 years before his arrival. Building



HENZ KLUETMEIER

A pass to Todd Brown and a drive to No. 1 were both ruined by Clemson in the '82 Orange Bowl.

his team around a fast, blitzing defense and a pass-oriented, pro-style offense, he planted the seeds for a program against which all others would measure themselves for the next 10 years. But on this day, the Hurricanes were 11-point underdogs. Not that Schnellenberger cared a whit, saying of his players, "They're about to face the Russian army, and they don't care. They think they're going to win. And I'm the silly bastard who has everybody around here thinking they will."

Indeed, Nebraska would prove ill-prepared to defend against Miami's damn-the-torpedoes offense, led by freshman

quarterback Bernie Kosar. Throughout the night the swift, cocksure Hurricanes shredded a Nebraska defense that had finished 73rd in the nation in total defense and whose players suddenly seemed as mobile as Stonehenge pillars. "Weight only works against you if it's leaning on you," said Schnellenberger. "If it has to stop and figure out where to lean, it's not a factor."

Superior talent alone kept Nebraska in the game. Trailing 31-17 with less than 12 minutes left to play, the Huskers drove 76 yards to cut the deficit in half. And after getting the ball back with 1:47 left, they put together their first easy drive of the night, moving 74 yards in 59 seconds to close the gap to 31-30.

There was no question what to do. Before that final drive it had been understood—on both sidelines—that Nebraska would go for the win, even though a tie would have secured the Cornhuskers a national title. "I knew they'd go for two," said Miami roverback Kenny Calhoun afterward. "They're champions. They had to." And so in the last decade, while fans and media have argued over Osborne's decision not to settle for the tie, one thing is beyond dispute: It was the Hurricanes who walked off with the dynasty.

JAN. 1, 1994

FLORIDA STATE 18, NEBRASKA 16

The hard lessons of four straight Orange Bowl spankings at the hands of Miami and Florida State had left an indelible impression on Osborne. After the Huskers' 23-3 loss to Miami in the 1989 Orange Bowl, Osborne began to make a push for the fleet defensive players he had theretofore overlooked. The result? While the Nebraska teams of Craig, Rozier, Gill and Fryar had been more top-heavy with talent, the 1993 team may have been Osborne's most skillfully assembled. But only against something other than the squirt-gun offenses of the Big Eight could Osborne's defensive handiwork be truly appreciated.

As the second-ranked offensive team in the country, Florida State offered just the right test—and was favored over the Huskers by 17½ points. That night, the Nebraska defense, led by linebacker Trev Alberts, sacked Heisman Trophy winner Charlie Ward five times. Furthermore, even in losing, Osborne dispelled the notion that he was a big-game gagmeister. Afterward, Florida State coach Bobby Bowden flatly said, "Tom did a better job than I did." At no moment had that analysis proved more correct than in the last minute of the game, with the Seminoles trailing 16-15. After Florida State wideout Kez McCorvey drew an interference penalty that put the ball on the Ne-



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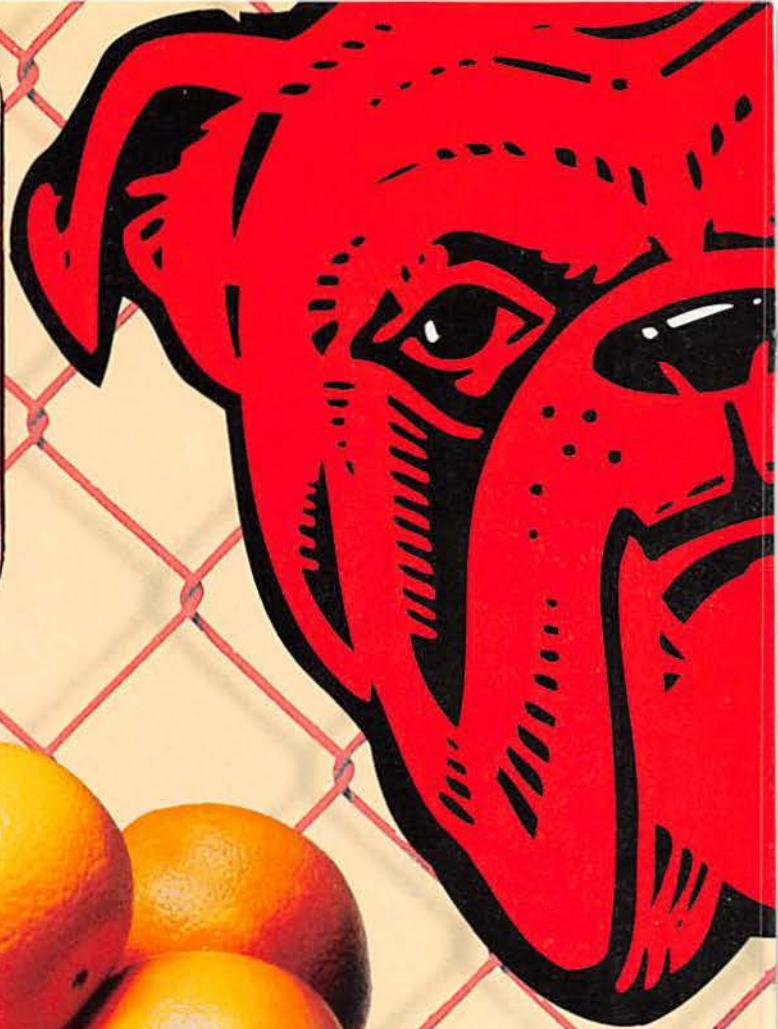
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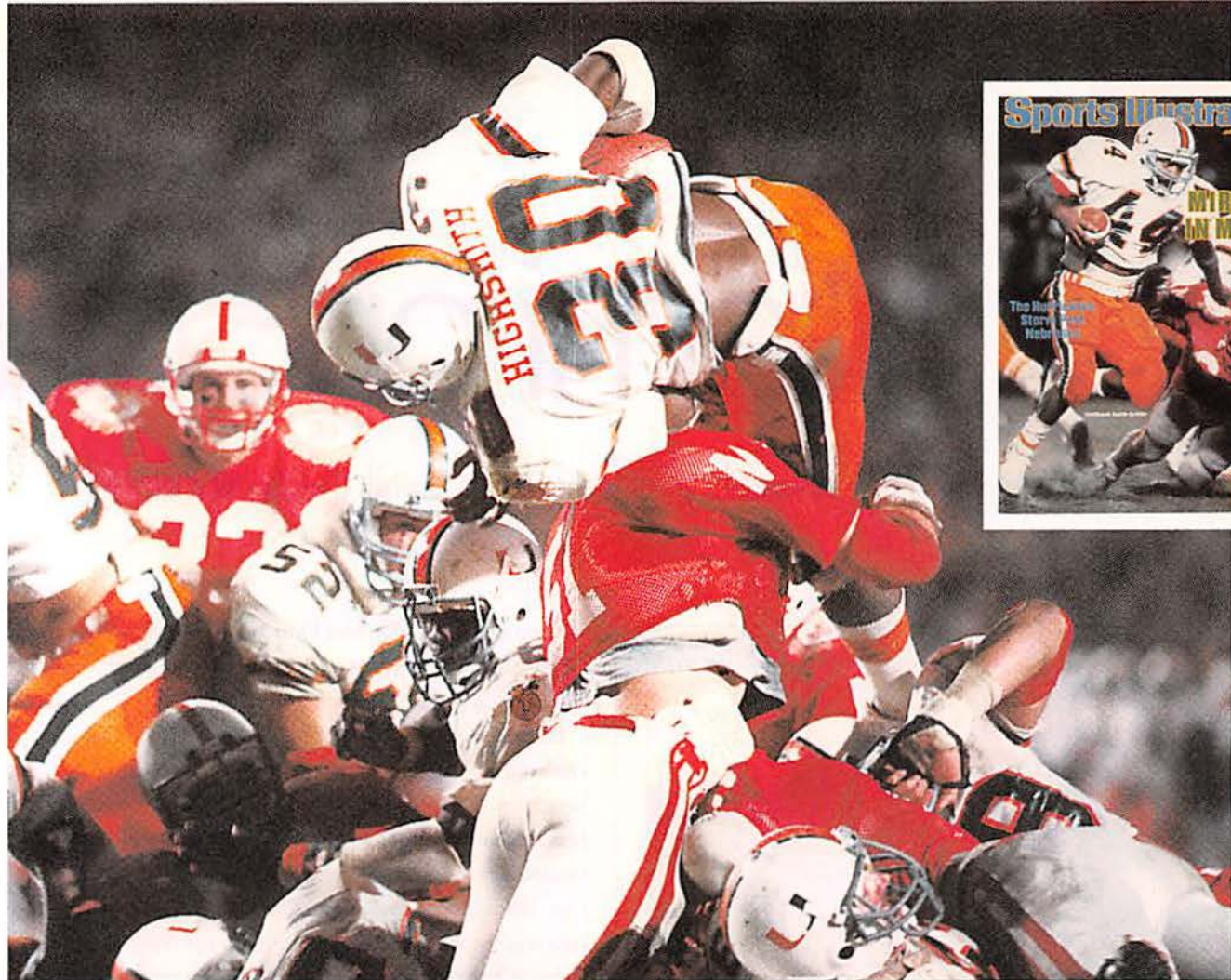
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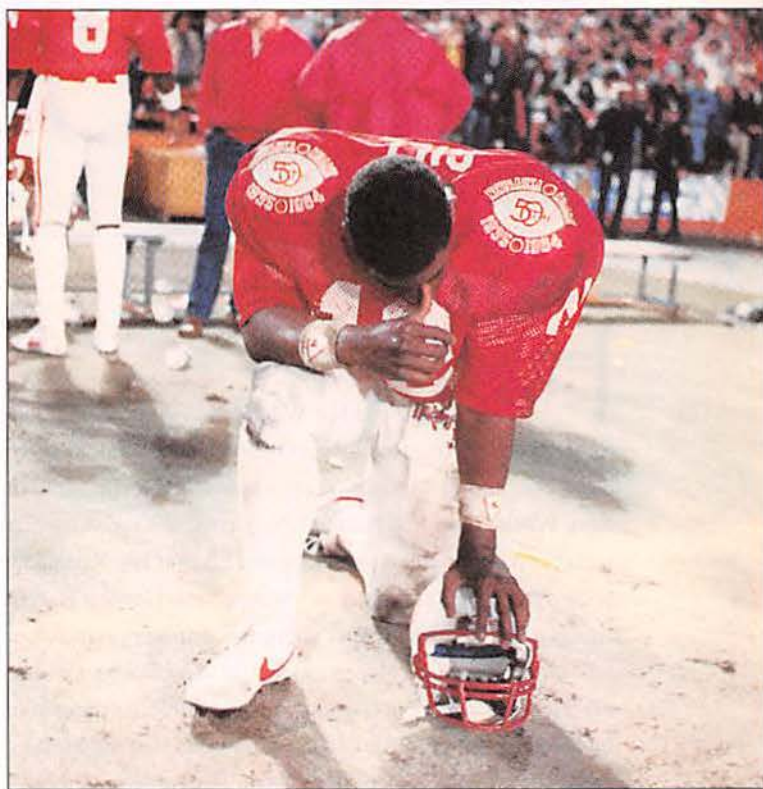
In '84 Gill was bowed and the 22-game Husker win streak was broken by Alonzo Highsmith and Miami.

braska three-yard line, the Seminoles ran one more play before calling timeout—with 24 seconds left on the clock.

Scott Bentley made the 22-yard field goal to give Florida State the lead, but enough time remained for Nebraska to drive the ball down to the Seminole 28 as the clock expired. However, as the Seminoles doused a jubilant Bowden with Gatorade and then pranced around the field in their national championship hats and T-shirts, the officials ruled that Husker tight end Trumane Bell had touched a knee to the ground with one second left, allowing Nebraska to call time—and attempt a field goal. To Bowden's great relief and Osborne's ongoing frustration, Bennett's kick sailed left.

No longer compelled to fend off questions about his coaching acumen in big games, Osborne allowed himself a subtle dig at his detractors when he said, "I don't know if anybody eats crow these days. They just conveniently forget what they said."

Left unsaid, though, was the still unresolved matter of Moby Dick. That conquest would have to wait another year. ■



Miami or Bust

Some hearty Huskers went to great lengths to get to the Orange Bowl | BY HANK HERSCH



Forty-four-year-old Jeff Wilch is a heating-and-cooling service manager from suburban Omaha whose scratchy voice, baggy eyes and brush cut suggest a beleaguered cop on a TV show. Wilch grew up in Ashland, Neb. (pop. 2,136), consumed by Nebraska football. At eight he saw his first Big Red game. At 20, as a helicopter gunner in Vietnam, he let loose a grateful whoop upon seeing a bumper sticker on a military vehicle that bore news a fortnight old: NEBRASKA 1970 NATIONAL CHAMPIONS. At 43, at a party in Omaha on Jan. 1, 1994, he flopped on the floor in front of 35 friends and promised to attend Mass every Sunday if the Cornhuskers' Byron Bennett would make a

last-second field goal to beat Florida State in the Orange Bowl. "Everyone loves to watch a Nebraska game with Jeff," says his wife, Sally, a nurse. "He's very entertaining."

But Jeff Wilch had long felt a void in his life. "Ever since I can remember, I'd dreamed of going to an Orange Bowl," he says. So at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 30, 1994, he stood with Sally in the parking lot of an Omaha hotel, decked out in Husker sweats, white socks and moccasins. A knot of men wearing red caps, holding coffee mugs and shifting on their feet in the gray cold was listening to Jeff hold forth on the Nebraska running game. A few feet away, their idling chariot awaited: a 51-seat bus that had left Grand Island, Neb., at 5:30 a.m. and was making its fourth and final pickup along I-80 as it headed to Miami.

You want to quantify notions like hope, faith and loyalty? Here were four dozen souls piling into a 20-ton metal crate for a 33-hour trip to see a 60-minute football game. Here were empty-nesters, frat brothers, Beef Clubbers and high schoolers doling out nearly \$400 apiece to Eagle Eye Tours of Henderson, Neb., for a game ticket, an invitation to a New Year's Eve party, two nights at a motel in Fort Lauderdale and the privilege of barreling through eight states and 1,636 mind-numbing miles—and back again. Here were folks from ages 13 to 71, out of towns from Wahoo to South Sioux City, subsisting on upright naps and leaden fast food to witness what might have turned out to be the Huskers' eighth straight loss in a bowl.

"If Jeff were to die on Monday, he would be totally fulfilled—if the Huskers win," Sally said. "If they lose, he says he's going to throw something red out of the bus every 50 miles."

Lose? The riders, like cockeyed astrologers fudging their calculations so that the planets would line up just right, figured

Busing 1,636 miles in 33 hours, the Big Red roadies kept dreaming of a Nebraska national title.





Arriving at the beach, Mary and Ben Ediger showed their colors—and prevented sunburn.

the Cornhuskers couldn't lose. After all, Nebraska was No. 1; the team finally had speed on defense; this was the last season of the Big Eight's automatic bid to the Orange Bowl; and coach Tom Osborne was long overdue to win his first national championship. Jason Brummund, 35, an electrical-parts salesman from Columbus (pop. 19,480), was going halfway across the country to watch the Big Red in person for the first time. "They won't lose; they can't do that to me," Brummund said, fishing a cigarette from a pack kept under the sleeve of his Cornhusker sweatshirt. "I've waited for this my whole life."

This pilgrimage drew a disparate crowd: a pair of buddies who had planned a similar bowl excursion a decade ago, only to cancel when one of their party came down with appendicitis; a widower of three weeks who ached for a change of scenery; a retired septuagenarian farmer and his wife, who said, "You can't leave all the good stuff to the kids"; an Omaha maintenance man making his third Orange Bowl bus junket; a pony-tailed health inspector from Bellevue (pop. 30,982) about to chuck his job and take his chances in Hollywood; and another health inspector, who said he was making the trip because "my wife and I just separated. She took the big screen."

For four upperclassmen from Beaver Valley High, the ride constituted their "senior sneak trip." Since their freshman year they had sold magazine subscriptions, spices and cookies to

come up with more than \$2,500 for a class junket. At a meeting in December the class had settled on Miami as its destination. How did they decide which seniors would get to go? "They all got to go," said their chaperone and science teacher, Sabrena Clinebell of Lebanon (pop. 75). "There are only 15 kids in the whole school."

After some 500 miles of rolling along, most of the passengers on the Big Red Express seemed to have reached their limits on eating Cheetos, playing Gameboy, tossing a red plastic football in truck-stop parking lots and reading out-of-state sports sections (each paper echoed the refrain "Nebraska can't win the big one"). Said Jeff Wilch, "We've only got a million-and-a-half people, and we're competing on a national level. I don't understand it. Why aren't we ever thought of as a Cinderella?" The occasional blaring of the Cornhusker fight song over the bus's P.A. system lifted a few spirits—as did the lifting of a few spirits. There was also the scenery for distraction: The arch was sighted in St. Louis!

Somewhere in Georgia, Julie Wilson of Wilsonville (pop. 137), the lone female in Beaver Valley's class of '95, sounded a cheery note: "I think the bus ride has been the best part."

"Sure," Sally Wilch snapped. "That's because so far it's been the *only* part."

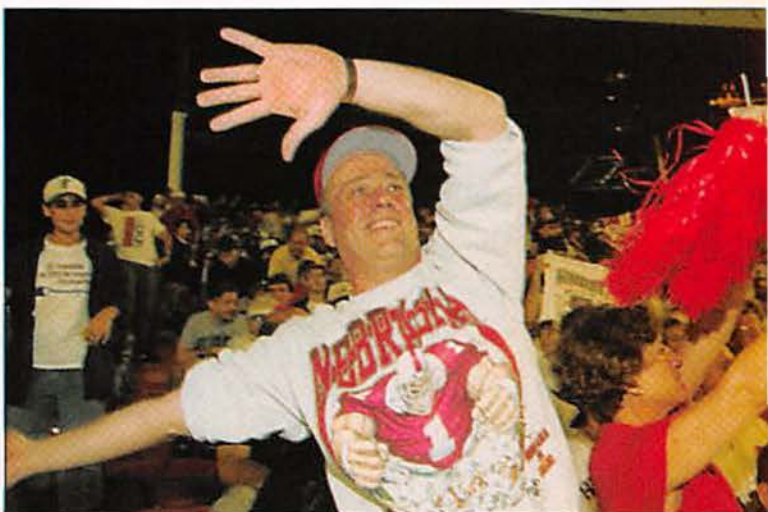
But shared suffering for a righteous cause breeds camaraderie. By the time the bus arrived in Fort Lauderdale, shortly before 6 p.m. on Saturday, there was a connection among the passengers, a feeling of accomplishment. After all, they had just

Jeff Wilch (right, with cap) looked glum early on, but in the end he and his busmates were riding high.

weathered an odyssey that stretched from their doorsteps in the heartland to the tip of Florida. Their reward was blue skies and rejuvenating warmth—made even warmer by the knowledge that half a foot of snow had fallen upon Nebraska since the bus pulled out.

About 24 hours later, after a night on the town and a day at the beach, the group would pile back onto the bus for a jaunt to the Orange Bowl itself. The Wilches' tickets put them a dozen rows up from the field, where Jeff turned his \$10 souvenir game program into a pulverized wad of sweat. Most of their fellow riders were seated at the top of the lower level in a corner of the stadium. They swooned, cheered and fretted almost as one. The view wasn't great, but that didn't matter. The thing was, they weren't just dreaming about being at the Orange Bowl. They were there.

By 12:09 a.m. they were all pinching themselves. Nebraska had just beaten Miami 24-17 to seize its first national championship in 23 years. Melvin Simms, the Omaha maintenance man who was at his fourth Orange Bowl—his third by bus—looked down on the field and smiled. Said Simms, "This is going to be a short ride home."



The Orange Bowl

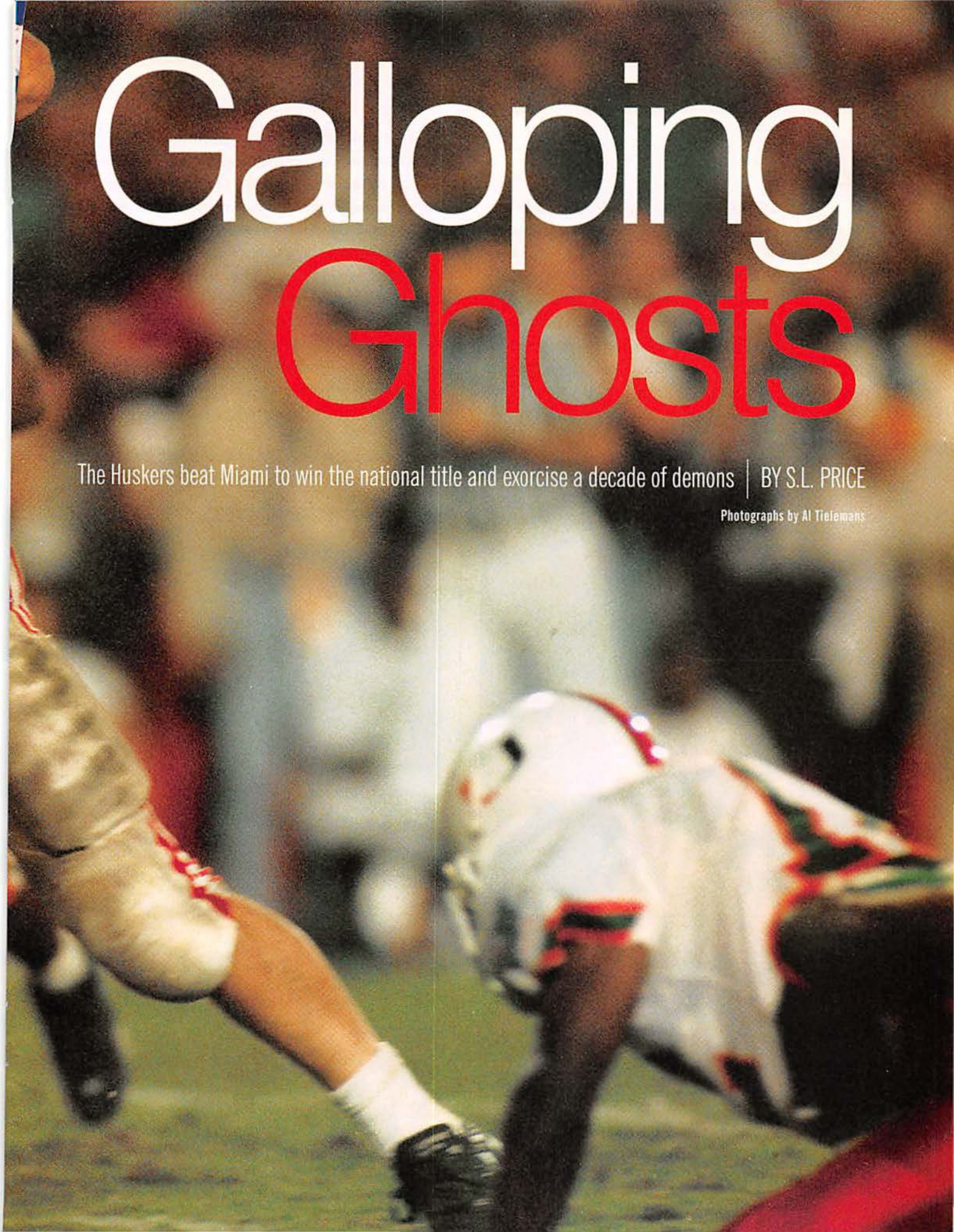


Nebraska never led until Schlesinger's game-winning TD run with 2:46 left.

Galloping Ghosts

The Huskers beat Miami to win the national title and exorcise a decade of demons | BY S.L. PRICE

Photographs by Al Tielemans



The Orange Bowl

All the ghosts were there. It was strange how they kept popping into view on New Year's night, so many reminders of how it had begun. There was Turner Gill, a Nebraska assistant coach now, but looking very much as he did in 1984 when he threw the Cornhuskers' final, futile pass. There was Howard Schnellenberger, Miami's coach back then, returning to the Orange Bowl, and his former players Bernie Kosar and Alonzo Highsmith, too. And there, of course, was Nebraska coach Tom Osborne, whose best chance for a national championship had seemed to evaporate 11 years before, when Gill's

two-point conversion toss fell incomplete, sealing a 31-30 loss to the Hurricanes and igniting Miami's dynasty and the Cornhuskers' decade of futility at the Orange Bowl. "Boy," said Highsmith, the former Hurricane running back, "that wasn't long ago." But what do ghosts know of time?

Osborne knows of time. Losing stretches minutes into hours, makes nights go on forever, turns years into decades. How many times after a bad game did Osborne roll over and punch the pillow as sleep eluded him? How many times did an interview crawl along as he was asked again and again about losing the big one? "You want to know if I suffer?" Osborne said softly before this year's climactic game. "Yeah, I suffer."

He suffers no more. Under a perfect South Florida sky,

Cornerback Barron Miles (14) showed that Husker defenders could keep up with Miami speedsters.





JOHN BIEVER

Miami's Costa took a seat in the end zone when linebacker Dwayne Harris dumped him for a safety.

against the once-unbeatable Hurricanes, in a stadium where he'd lost five straight bowl games, Osborne finally caught history. Because in what will be the final championship game played at the original Orange Bowl stadium, the unlikely ghost of New Year's Past—one Tommie Frazier—lifted Osborne to a perfect 13-0 record and his first national championship. A year before, Frazier, the quarterback, had outplayed Florida State's Charlie Ward in the Orange Bowl, but the Huskers fell short, losing 16-14 as Seminole coach Bobby Bowden won *his* first national championship. This year the imperturbable Frazier, playing in his first game since a blood clot was found in his right leg on Sept. 25, piloted the Huskers to two fourth-quarter touchdowns and a sloppy, frenetic, wonderful 24-17 victory.

Afterward, Osborne was his usual vanilla self, taking the title, the cleansing win over Miami and a congratulatory call

from President Clinton all in stride. Those begging for a show of emotion got a smile, nothing more. Osborne said he was "gratified" to have his 22-year Nebraska coaching career capped by a title. "I'm pleased," he said, "but I'm not usually overwrought." Only those who know him understood what this game meant to him. "You could see it in his eyes," said Cornhusker guard Brenden Stai. "I've never seen brighter eyes in my life."

It was Frazier who had illuminated those eyes. Even though he shared time during the game with backup Brook Berringer, there was little doubt whom Osborne trusted more. "I want the ball in Tommie's hands," Osborne said into his headset to Gill. After the game, Osborne said of the junior from Bradenton, Fla., "He's a special athlete. He can create so many things. You don't have to rely on structure. He'll make the play."

Nothing said more about Frazier's talents than the moment when, with Nebraska down 17-9 midway through the fourth quarter, he stepped into the huddle, looked every player

The Orange Bowl

squarély in the eye and said, "We're getting it done. We're scoring now." Two plays later, Nebraska fullback Cory Schlesinger bulled in from 15 yards out. Then, in a nice bit of exorcism, Frazier completed—yes, in the same end zone in which Gill's pass had fallen short—a two-point conversion pass to tight end Eric Alford to tie the game. "I'm a very confident person," Frazier said afterward. "Once we tied, I knew that would take it out of them."

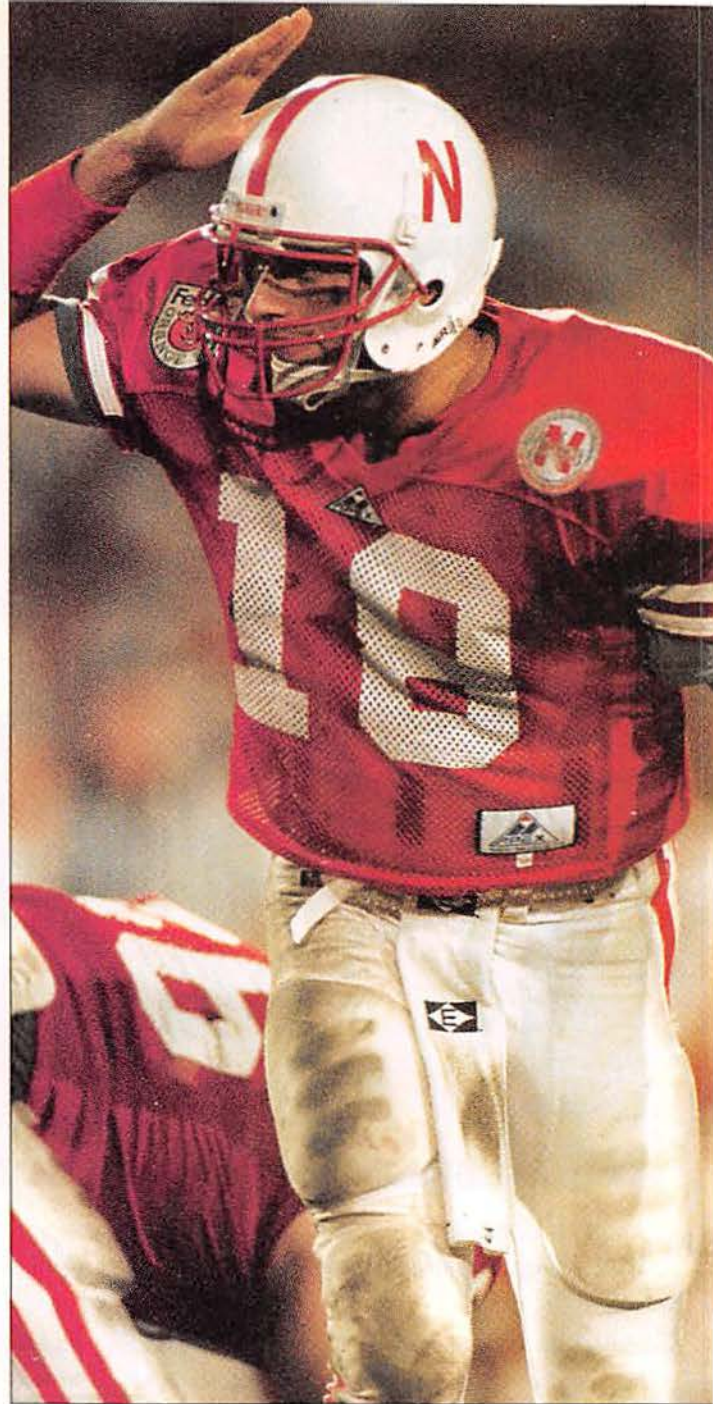
Frazier engineered one more drive, for 58 yards, and Schlesinger rolled in for the winning 14-yard score. "Coming back to my home state and beating the team that had lost just once here in 63 times . . . you can't ask for anything more," Frazier said. "This is what I told a lot of people: 'When I come back it's going to be the national-championship game, and I'm going to lead my team to victory.' I feel great."

Which may have been Frazier's most astounding accomplishment. He had missed the final eight games of the regular season and was taken off blood-thinning medication just five days before the Orange Bowl. Yet with the exception of one botched pass that Osborne should never have called, Frazier performed as if he'd never been gone. "If he can come in here and beat our defense after being out nine weeks, I'll be his biggest fan," Miami safety Malcolm Pearson had said a few days before the game. "I'll be his groupie."

Frazier played just six series in the Orange Bowl, throwing three completions, no touchdowns and one interception. He rushed for only 31 yards. Yet Nebraska scored twice under his guidance, and not an eyebrow was raised when Frazier was named the game's most valuable player. "When you have a great quarterback like him—and I consider him one of the great players in college football—it's pretty hard to keep him out of the lineup," said Miami coach Dennis Erickson after the game. "He's just the best quarterback that I've seen all year."

Frazier didn't work alone, of course. This Nebraska team, after all, carried itself just fine without him for the regular season's final eight games, as Berringer and sophomore I-back Lawrence Phillips and the best offensive line ever assembled in Lincoln rolled unscathed through the Big Eight. Nothing, not even the two frightening occasions in early October when Berringer's left lung partially collapsed, seemed to ruffle the Cornhuskers.

Haunted by a championship they felt they should have won in last year's Orange Bowl, the team dubbed this season Unfinished Business. During last summer's conditioning drills, the scoreboard at Lincoln's Memorial Stadium constantly flashed



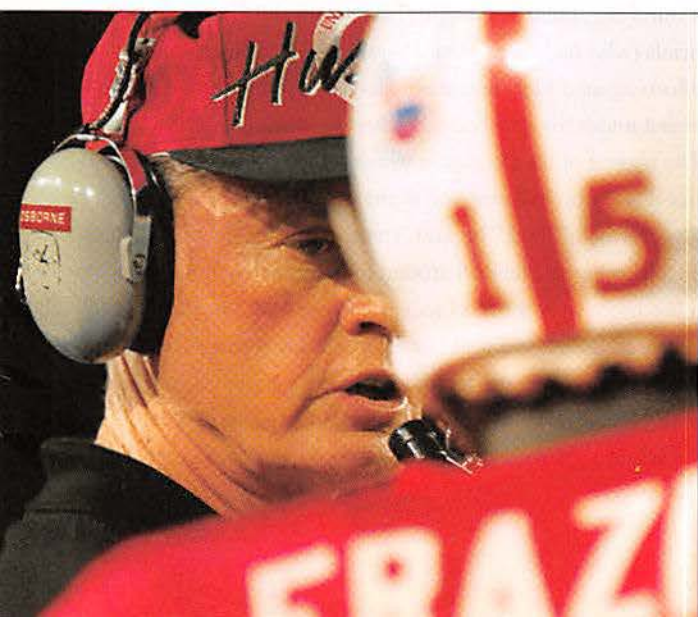
Berringer (18) played a heady game until his fourth-quarter pass was intercepted by Little (4), prompting Osborne to turn to Frazier once again.

"1:16"—the last time Nebraska took the lead in the 1994 Orange Bowl. "We looked at it every day to remind ourselves where we were and where we wanted to be," Stai said.

"I've never had a team that had this much resolve," Osborne said. "We hardly got off the field last year before they said they were going to be back. They had a tremendous off-season, tremendous spring ball, tremendous summer. Then they worked their tails off the last month preparing for this. They're a very



JOHN BIEVER



unified group, and they knew what they wanted to do. And nothing was going to stand in their way."

But the landscape of college football is littered with teams that have resolved to beat the Hurricanes in the Orange Bowl only to find themselves outworked, outrun, outplayed and simply intimidated by a collection of players who backed up every cocky utterance with supreme effort. The Hurricanes were 62-1 in the Orange Bowl over the last nine years; they had also won all three bowl games they'd played there during that time—and it was no coincidence that they'd done so in each case over lead-footed, option-happy Nebraska teams. "No team had more to prove in here than Nebraska," said Highsmith.



The Hurricane dynasty was built on speed, especially on defense, where high school safeties became linebackers and linebackers became defensive ends. So after Miami blew out the Cornhuskers 23-3 in the '89 Orange Bowl, the Nebraska coaching staff knew it had to forgo recruiting those earnest but slow in-state boys for the secondary. "But then we had to go out and get the personnel," says Husker defensive coordinator Charlie McBride, "which wasn't something that happened overnight."

Three winters later, shortly after the 22-0 loss to Miami in the '92 Orange Bowl, Osborne and his staff began landing those quicker, more athletic types from Florida, Texas and California—the breeding grounds for Miami's success. "I grew up following Nebraska pretty closely, and it wasn't clear to me why Miami and Florida State had so much success against them in the Orange Bowl," said Cornhusker senior linebacker Troy Dumas. "But when we played Miami my first year here, I knew why. I was standing on the sidelines just in awe of their speed. It was incredible. And I said to myself, We need some of that."

They got some. Nebraska's defense, led by All-America linebacker Ed Stewart, came into the 1995 Orange Bowl ranked second in the nation in points allowed, behind Miami, and boasted a 4.7 average in the 40, compared with the Hurricanes' 4.64. Two of Nebraska's front seven had been moved there from the secondary.

Though unmasked as vulnerable to the big play, the Huskers nevertheless forced Miami to punt four straight times in the

Schlesinger left the Hurricanes in his wake on the first of his two TDs, but it was Frazier (15) who earned MVP honors by guiding the Huskers to victory.

fourth quarter before intercepting Frank Costa's final pass with one minute to play. "That's what we dreamed about all year," said Nebraska senior outside linebacker Donta Jones. "We came out and proved to the whole world that we could stop a team like Miami in the fourth quarter." The Hurricanes had visibly sagged while the Huskers got stronger, clearly dominating both sides of the line of scrimmage. "They had a lot of vacation," Jones said. "We didn't come here for vacation; we came for business."

After the game the always businesslike Osborne walked around the stadium, thanking his players and Orange Bowl officials (who had been privately joking about Nebraska's futile efforts against Florida teams). He wandered about with a clipboard under his arm and a bag lunch dangling from his hand. The biggest of his 219 career wins was just over, and he looked like a guy who had stopped at the deli on his way to the train. "It feels awful good," he said. Then, just as the lights of the Orange Bowl went black all around him, he tried to come up with a few more bons mots. "I feel great," he said. "But I felt good last year. We played well last year, well enough to win. I don't get as hung up on the trophies as some people think." As his wife, Nancy, says, "We're not real demonstrative people."

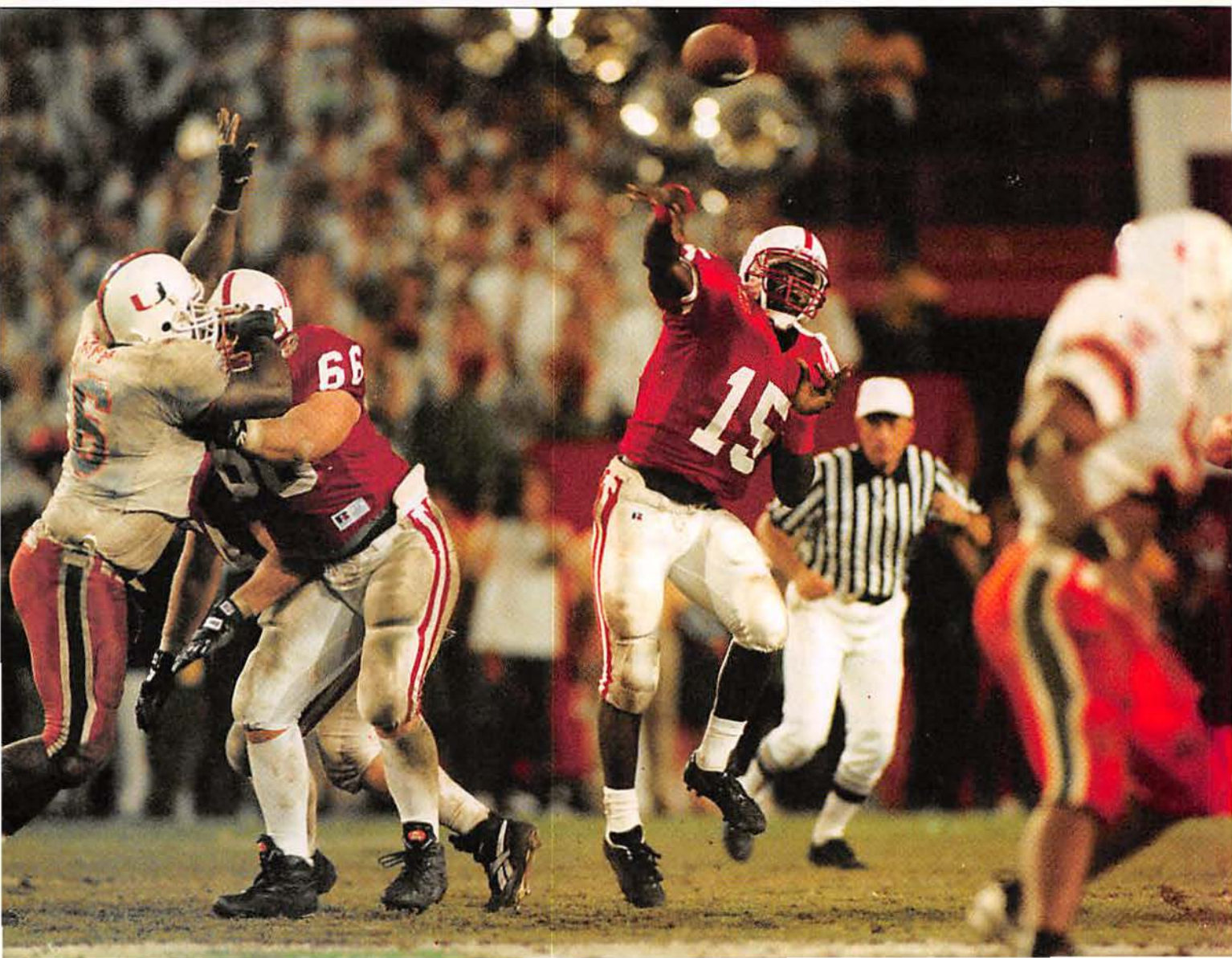
Osborne, of course, was fully aware of how close his team

The Orange Bowl

had come to another disappointment, attributable in part to two atrocious calls he'd made. The first came in the first quarter when, after 10 plays that established the Nebraska running attack, Osborne called for a deep pass. Frazier forced the ball into double coverage, and cornerback Carlos Jones intercepted. Five plays later Costa fired his first touchdown pass, putting the Hurricanes up 10-0. Osborne's second error came in the first minute of the fourth quarter, when, trailing 17-9, the Cornhuskers had the ball on first-and-goal at the Miami four-yard line. But instead of relying, as usual, on the best rushing team in the nation, Osborne called for a pass. With all his receivers covered, Berringer tried to fire the ball out of the end zone; instead, his throw went into the corner, where safety Earl Little made a leaping interception. It seemed like the game-breaker, and in any other year, in any other Orange Bowl, it probably would have been. But not this year.

Osborne has weathered his share of criticism over the years, but in the wake of this triumph, all was forgiven. After one postgame interview, a Lincoln television reporter finished by saying, "God bless you, Coach." Said McBride, who has worked with Osborne since arriving in Lincoln in 1977, "Hopefully this will take the monkey off his back. I don't think people, especially in the state of Nebraska, know what they really have. He's been here for 22 years, and he's been beaten down by a lot of things. People have said that football's passed him by and other garbage. This is something the guy deserves. He's put more into this football program than anyone could imagine, so much time and effort."

And now Osborne had what he calls "the whole banana." There was a moment late, after he had finally finished with the reporters and the players, after he had finally met up with Nancy and their son, Mike, and grandson Will and daughters Ann



The Orange Bowl

and Suzi and son-in-law Kevin, when he began walking down the tunnel to the stadium exit. Outside waiting for him were hundreds of people wearing red and bellowing. "The thing I felt, the pressure coming into this game, was how many people were going to be devastated if we didn't win it," Osborne had said earlier. "Everybody was saying, 'It's our turn. It's your year,' but in athletics you don't take turns." Now he was walking out, but he had walked too fast; he was steps ahead of his family. So when he heard all the noise in front of him, he turned back for a moment, looking for support, but no one was there for him. For the first time all night, he had no idea what to do. "What? . . ." he said. He called out, and then his family caught up. They walked out together.

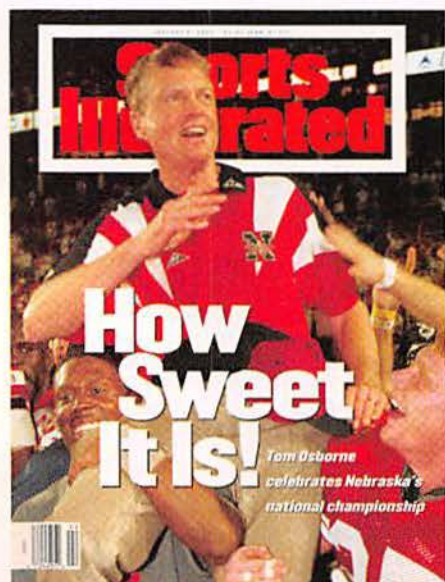
"Nebraska! Tom! Hey, Tom!" the fans yelled at once, and Osborne grinned and waved and bore it all, lunch bag still in hand. Then, blinking furiously, he stepped onto bus number 5903, trying to get away from the crush and the exhaust fumes, as motorcycle cops gunned their engines. Wrong bus;

no room for Coach Osborne. He stepped down, went to bus number 5905, and as he stood in the doorway, a man screamed at him, "You're Number 1, Tom!" A stone-faced Osborne stared at the man as if he had accused him of a crime. Then Osborne went and sat down behind the driver. It was 1:15 a.m. He slowly pulled out his sandwich, unwrapped it

and, leaning over, took a polite bite. He chewed awhile. The bus hummed.

And there through the windshield loomed the edifice where Tom Osborne had been mocked and laughed at for so many years: MIAMI ORANGE BOWL blared the huge sign on the side of the stadium, and it was painted Hurricane orange. He glanced at it in between chews, but it wasn't until the bus driver turned off the inside lights that Osborne could get a clear view.

All the ghosts were gone. ■

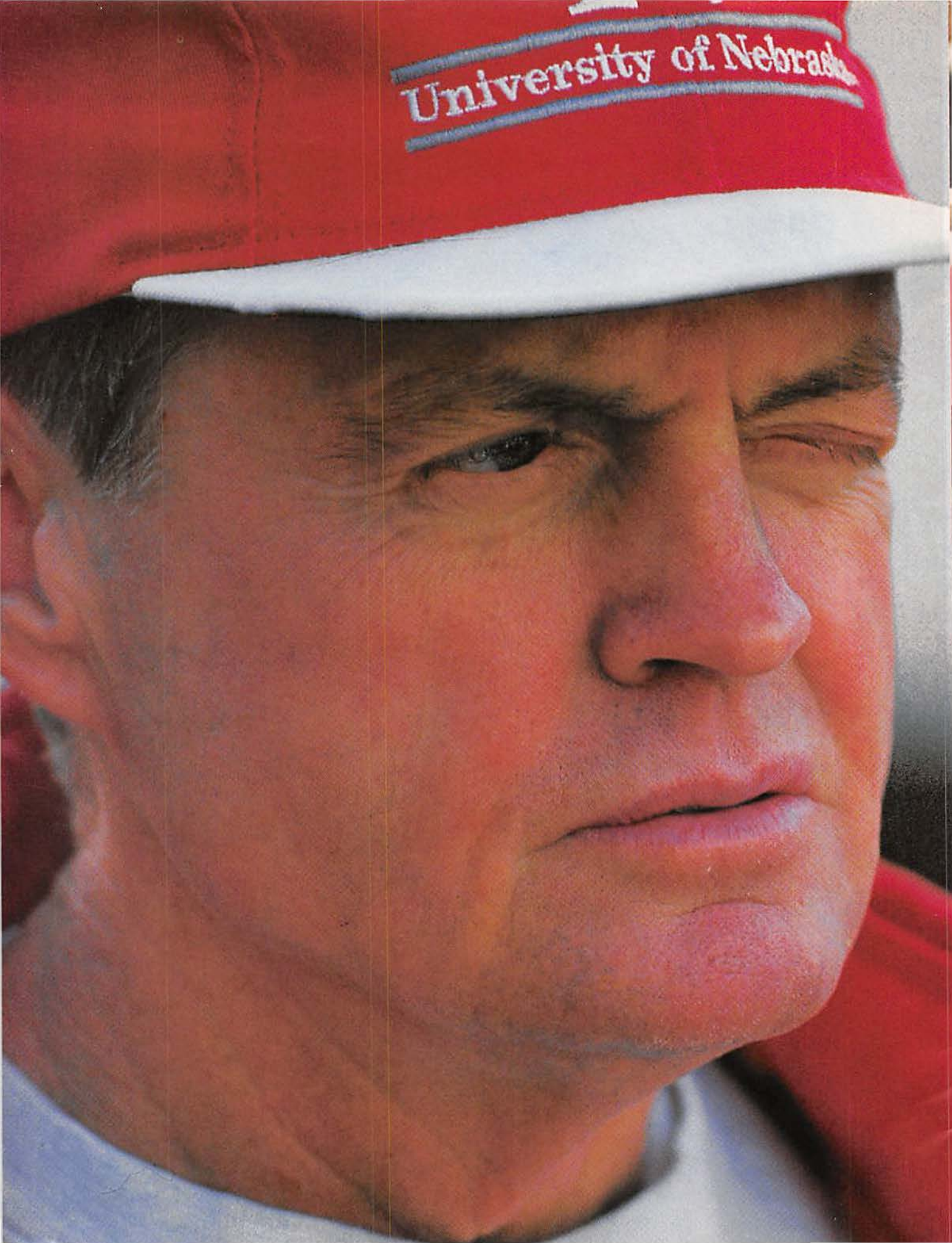


ROBERT ROGERS



In the end, kicker Tom Sieler got a victory ride from tackle Jason Jenkins, and Osborne tasted ultimate triumph.





Tom's Title

Yes, you can call Tom Osborne bland, but
now you can also call him national champion

| BY SALLY JENKINS

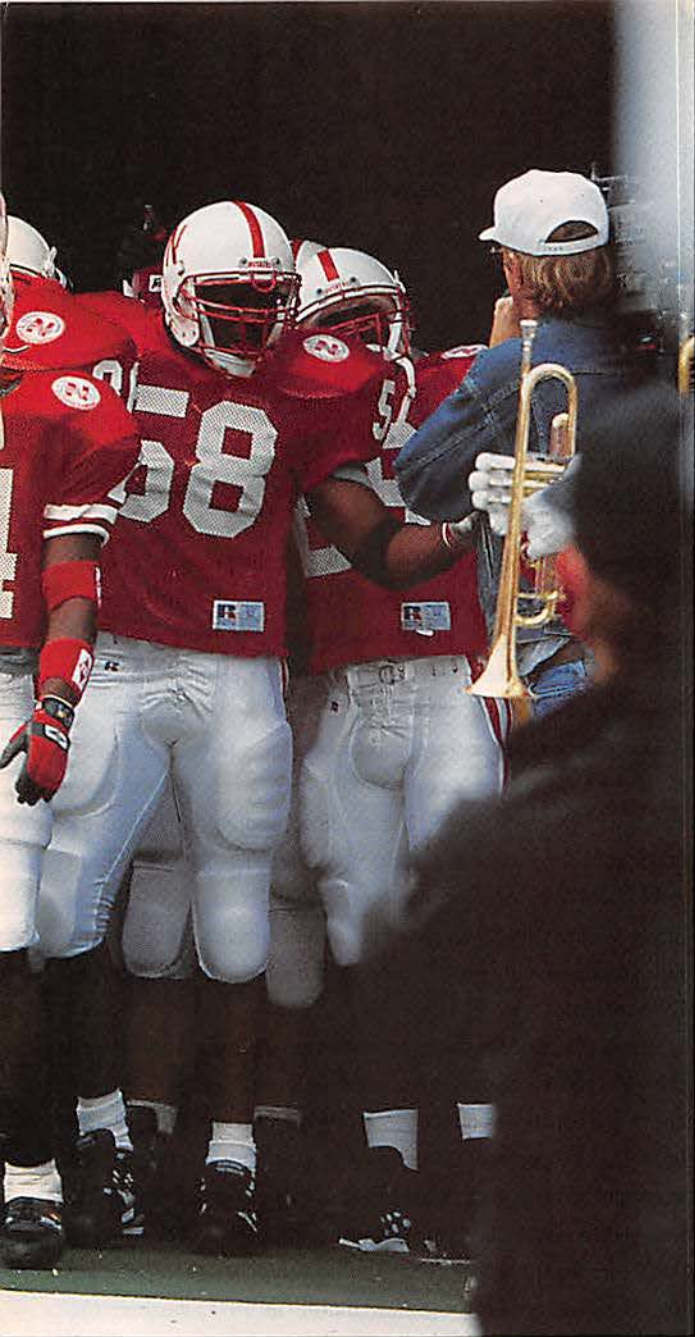


Lincoln is not a bad place to be if you care about family values, hearty food and truck-stop philosophy. The earth there is dark and as flat as a coffee table. Somewhere a train whistles. The girl at the five-and-dime rings up a roll of Lifesavers and adds the sales tax, saying, "That'll be 35 cents, plus the government." It's a town where you can disappear into your own thoughts for 33 years—a perfect place for Nebraska coach Tom Osborne, a shy, deeply private man whose apparent goal is to be invisible. "There are times when I'd like to evaporate," he says.

Sometimes it seems that he already has. His face is as white and starched as his shirt. His eyes are blue and kindly but distant, like something reflected in a storefront window. "Some fella the other day called me a bowl of Cream of Wheat," he

says, and he attempts to laugh. His mouth twists into an awkward smile, then folds back into its natural expression, which is rueful. "Tom has never rolled up his britches and danced on a tabletop," says Iowa State coach Jim Walden, an old acquaintance. Instead of dancing, for more than three decades Osborne has jogged three miles a day, five days a week, around the same Nebraska track. "I guess I'm in a rut," he says.

Some rut. For 26 straight years the Cornhuskers have won at least nine games and have gone to a bowl. Last season Osborne, 57, reached the 200-victory mark, joining only two other active coaches, Joe Paterno of Penn State and Bobby Bowden of Florida State. And, finally, on Jan. 1, he achieved the ultimate reward of his profession, the one that had always eluded him. Tom Osborne won a national championship.



DAVID WALBERG

The head Red since '73, Osborne lacked a crown on his career until the '94 team won the big one.

Nebraska's victory over Miami in the Orange Bowl gave Osborne that missing title and, in a single stroke, transformed his career from workmanlike to brilliant. It also redeemed years of criticism that he couldn't win the big one. In retrospect, Osborne's characteristic silence in the face of perennial skepticism and Monday-morning quarterbacking now looks like quiet grace.

"He doesn't really complain out loud," former Cornhusker linebacker Trev Alberts once observed. "I guess because the subject frustrates him."

It was for just such reticence that Osborne was nicknamed

Yak in high school in Hastings, Neb. But in a rare burst of eloquence, he once called the national championship "my albatross." Indeed, his failure to win the title colored his career and rendered his relationship with Nebraska fans "uneasy," he says. For while Osborne had never brought the Cornhuskers to grief, neither had he ever raised them to the heights they reached with back-to-back national championships in 1971 and '72 under Bob Devaney. Osborne won only the games he was supposed to win, losing to a lower-ranked team just twice in 268 games. Until the victory over Miami, Nebraska had lost its last seven bowl games and had beaten a Top 10 team just two times in its last nine attempts.

Osborne didn't need his doctorate in educational psychology to realize that some people regarded him as the guy who always loses the big one. He also understood that no one wanted to hear about the mitigating circumstances, such as these: In six of those seven bowl losses, Nebraska's opponent was ranked either No. 1 or No. 2; and four of the losses were to either Miami or Florida State—in Florida. Osborne has never been one to argue. He simply told his secretary to screen out the hate mail, and he simmered in his own mild fashion. "Our obsession with Number 1 in this country tends to drive us toward the conclusion that you have to reach the top of the hill, and everybody else is a loser," he said last season.

One of Osborne's staunchest defenders has been Devaney, who gives much of the credit for his titles in 1971 and '72 to the young assistant who was his chief play-caller. Devaney believes that Osborne demonstrated long ago that he has the fire to win the national title. "He's not a person to irritate," Devaney says. "He will take only so much pushing around." Indeed, Osborne can launch a locker room tirade so furious that it leaves him trembling. "He gets so mad, his eyes kind of water," former kicker Byron Bennett once observed. But the strongest word this Sunday-school teacher employs is *dadgummit*.

Hardly anybody other than Osborne's wife, Nancy, and three children claims to know him. His best friends, he says, are "fish guides." Osborne's idea of a vacation is to cast a line into a pond on his working farm in Valparaiso, Neb. He likes fishing because it offers him unbroken solitude. He tried golf for a while but discovered that even on the links Nebraskans tried to talk to him about the national championship.

Still, he protests, "I'm not the shrinking violet people think I am. I'm not a recluse. But what I do for a living is such an open book. It happens in front of 75,000 people every week. So I try to hang on to something."

The Coach

One thing Osborne finally let go of was the pressure he had been under since he took over from Devaney, who was not only wildly successful but also famously charming. By comparison, Osborne seemed bloodless. Comparing him with Devaney, in fact, became a joke on Osborne's first team, the '73 squad. One day during a quarterback drill someone suggested that Osborne, a former receiver who played three seasons in the NFL, run a route. He cheerfully sprinted out for a pass. Quarterback David Humm fired a bullet, and as Osborne caught it, a defensive back speared him in the back, upending him and knocking the ball loose.

As Osborne slowly got to his feet, Humm said, "Devaney would've hung on to that one."

Being undervalued has been the story of Osborne's life at Nebraska. He spent his first three years there working for no pay. In 1962 Devaney grudgingly gave the 25-year-old Osborne

Osborne (with Tommie Frazier, below) has found his Ph.D. in educational psychology helpful.



DAVID WALBERG

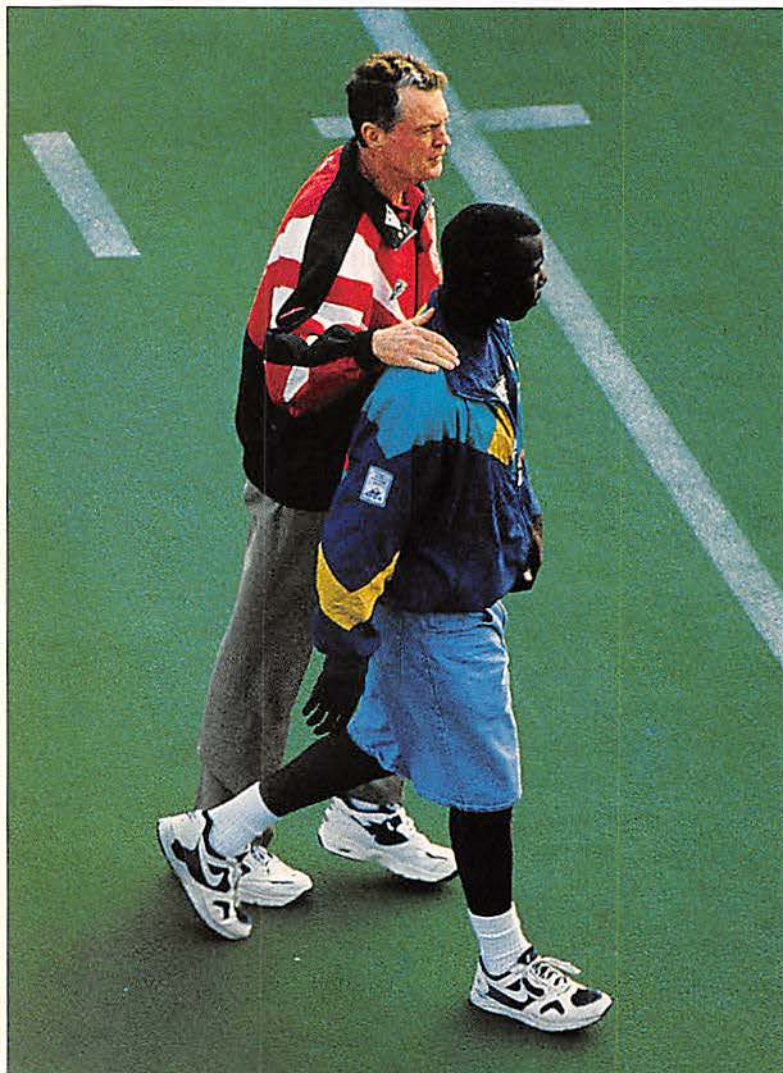
a job as an unsalaried assistant while he took postgrad courses in psychology. Devaney assigned Osborne a dormitory room and told him he could eat his meals at the training table, but that was all the coach offered. "I didn't treat him very well," Devaney says.

Devaney and his staff were a backslapping bunch who spent their time on the golf course or in bars when they weren't coaching, and they viewed the studious and churchgoing new assistant with skepticism. "He was different from the other guys," says Walden, who was on that staff, "but he didn't look down on anybody." Devaney figured Osborne would probably quit after a year or two. "I thought he'd be a schoolteacher," Devaney says.

But it gradually became apparent to all those around him that this quietest assistant had a galvanic touch with the offense and a steadying influence on troubled players. One of Osborne's least-likely relationships was with Johnny Rodgers, the searingly fast wingback whose brilliant career as a Cornhusker was largely attributable to Osborne, even though the two of them rarely agreed on anything but football. Rodgers, who led the Cornhuskers to the national title in 1971, became Osborne's personal charge. Osborne devised schemes to get the ball to Rodgers, and—away from the field—the coach and player ran together every day, talking about football and the world in general. "We talked and we ran, we ran and we talked," says Rodgers, who eventually left school with the Heisman but no degree.

Today Rodgers is a 44-year-old undergraduate at Nebraska majoring in broadcasting. He returned to school in the fall of '93 under an NCAA community-service program that allows schools to put former players back on scholarship so that they can earn their degrees. Osborne helped Rodgers gain access to the program.

"We don't see eye to eye on many things," Rodgers says of his former coach. "He's always disapproved of my lifestyle. I took chances, and Tom was more settled. But one thing we

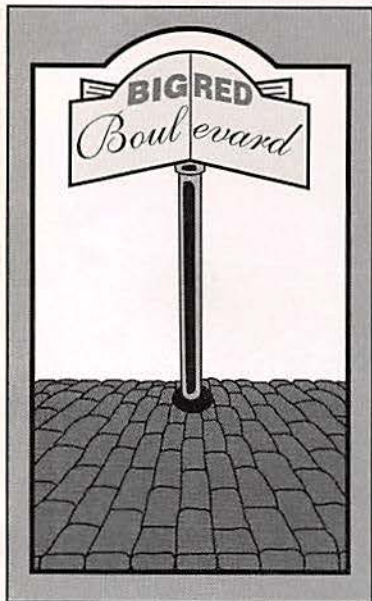


BILL FRANKS

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* Your onetime donation will ensure your brick will be part of the Big Red Boulevard through the year 2000. Your donation does not apply towards ticket priority, seating or parking.



BILL FRANKS

agree on is that we're friends. He's treated me the same way for 20 years: honestly."

Like Rodgers, Osborne is an impassioned defender of the athletic scholarship as an agent of social change. Osborne has bucked the NCAA's attempts to raise academic standards for athletes, arguing that the standards are elitist and that college entrance tests are racially biased. He believes that many underprivileged athletes will be shut out if they can't qualify for admission as athletic exceptions. To bolster his arguments, he notes that his players who have completed their eligibility have had an 81% graduation rate, that 42 of them have been desig-

nated first-team Academic All-Americans and that 155 have been named to the All-Academic Big Eight team.

The coach puts his money where his mouth is. Several years ago he started a grassroots youth program in Omaha to help children who are in danger of dropping out of high school. Every year he adds \$10,000 of his own money to the effort.

"Tom does his duty," says Nebraska associate athletic director Don Bryant. "When he retires there probably won't be a lot of great, hilarious stories about him. But there will be some poignant ones."

Why did greatness elude Osborne for so long? One widely



After more than three dutiful decades here, Osborne is unlikely ever to run far from Lincoln.

accepted explanation is that he relied on a one-dimensional option offense and on big, corn-fed linemen who could dominate their Big Eight counterparts but were too slow for the opponents they faced in the bowls. Lately, however, Osborne has added more passing schemes and recruited smaller, swifter linemen and linebackers. The Cornhuskers served notice that they were a changed team in '93 with one of their quickest and most ambitious teams in years. An unbeaten squad went into the Orange Bowl against top-ranked Florida State as 17½-point underdogs. Instead the Huskers played the Seminoles, supposedly one of the best offensive teams in college

football history, to a draw before losing in the final moments on Scott Bentley's field goal.

Another chapter in the book on Osborne reads that he is too boring to uplift a team. "He is not a motivational-type guy," says Rodgers. "He's not a general." But does a great coach have to be larger than life? Perhaps not. The statesmanlike Paterno is revered, and the colorful Bowden (who, no one needs to remind Osborne, was also without a national championship until the '94 Orange Bowl) is beloved. Osborne is unapologetically ordinary. Title in hand, he may never leave Nebraska.

"There's no place I'd prefer to get to," he says. ■

Point After



ROBERT ROGERS

A sack of Miami's Frank Costa late in the Orange Bowl had Terry Connealy (99) and the Huskers on top of the world.

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B T-Shirt	Red or Grey	Adult: M, L, XL
Sweatshirt	Red or Grey	Adult: S, M, L, XL, XXL
C T-Shirt	Red Only	Adult: M, L, XL, XXL Youth: S, M, L, XL
Sweatshirt	Red Only	Adult: M, L, XL Youth: S, M, L, XL
D T-Shirt	Black Only	Adult: M, L, XL, XXL, XXXL
H T-Shirt	Black Only	Adult: M, L, XL Youth: M, L, XL
Sweatshirt	Black Only	Adult: M, L, XL Youth: M, L, XL



E

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G

Commemorative Football

(Available 1/25/95)
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D

Celebration

T-Shirt
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To the defeated
go the sorrows.

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